

# English with an Accent

## Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States

Second Edition

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# Introduction

Language ideology or science fiction?

The American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1984: 64)

If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion.

Noam Chomsky (<http://tinyurl.com/4q7eej4>)

This book is about language, but let's begin with a bit of science fiction. Imagine the following:

On January 1 of the next new year, each person residing in the United States wakes up to find themselves physically transformed: regardless of race or ethnicity, all adult males 18 and older will be exactly 6' tall and weigh 175 pounds; adult females, 5'9", at 140 pounds. All persons will show exactly the same physical measurements (length of tibia, diameter of wrist) and body fat ratios, with a differential arising from gender-specific roles in the propagation of the species. All persons newborn through age 17 will approach the adult model on a scale graduated exactly to age. Metabolism has adjusted so that the ratios of height to weight are maintained regardless of diet or development of musculature.

Let's take this strange idea a step further and imagine what this revolution would mean to us in our day-to-day lives. Some of the repercussions might be seen as positive:

- Tremendous behavior shifts in matters of mate selection and sexuality. Every woman will wear what is now a size ten, but as sizes are no longer relevant or meaningful, the social connotations of clothing sizes (petite or queen, extra tall, extra long, extra broad, extra narrow) will quickly be lost.
- The end of the diet industry.
- Sudden resolution of health problems related to weight. Heart disease, hypertension, anorexia – a whole range of difficult health problems greatly simplified or resolved overnight.
- Dramatic changes in the way we think about food. As metabolism is now fine-tuned to deal with excessive or insufficient calories, carbohydrate and fat intake, much of the culture and psychology about eating would evolve in new directions.
- Revolution in the design and manufacture of easy chairs, roller-skates, toothbrushes, gloves, skis, kitchen counters, bathtubs, lawnmower handles, car seats, bed sheets, violins, submarines, auditoriums, coffins and everything else which now makes allowance for variation in physical size. This would mean a tremendous economic advantage for businesses which can streamline production in ways never imagined.

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- Sports, professional and otherwise, would change greatly. But because muscle tone, agility, speed, and strength would remain matters of life style, nutrition, and training, sports as we know them would not disappear, but shift in focus and nature.

These are just a few areas which would be changed. The list can easily be expanded as we anticipate the major social and cultural impact on our lives.

When I discuss this fictional United States with my classes, the students are eager to list things that would be easier, cheaper, more streamlined and efficient if this physical world were suddenly to become a reality. Slowly, different considerations begin to emerge, which students are sometimes reluctant to express. They have to do with issues which are more subtle, which touch on identity and self-awareness, aesthetic and value systems. It sounds like this would be a good thing overall, for us as a country, says one student. But my father and my grandfather and my great-grandfather were all 6'5" or bigger. With less of an apologetic tone, a Japanese-American woman tells the class "I can't imagine being that tall." Another student asks, "Who decided on these particular figures? Why 140 pounds for women – wouldn't 125 be more aesthetically pleasing?" And yet another comment: "Why shouldn't men and women be the same height?"

Before I let the class discuss these questions in any depth, there is one more step in the science fiction fantasy which we must consider.

Imagine now that this unanticipated and unwilling transformation does not take place. Instead, a junior Congresswoman rises before the House of Representatives and she presents a precise, well-written proposal for a law which dictates the physical world imagined above, in which a woman who is 6'2" or a man who weighs 225 pounds are either violating federal law willfully, or must be labeled handicapped.

In support of her proposal, the Congresswoman outlines the many social ills which will be instantaneously fixed, and the economic advantages for the manufacturing and business communities. She provides projections which promise that billions of dollars will be saved if this law is put into effect, money which can be put into education and job training. Her presentation includes complex essays and calculations by a panel of experts who have, on the basis of considerable study, determined what ideal heights and weights must be – what makes a superior, efficient, aesthetically pleasing human being.

"Let us all be one height and weight," she says. "For we are all one nation."

This is a funny idea; students laugh. What is wrong with it is so obvious as to be trivial, they tell me.

First, we cannot all be the same height and weight and physical type: variation and diversity are inescapable biological facts. Thus, this law would be unenforceable.

Second, even if this were not an impossibility, it would be wrong – an invasion of personal liberties – to require people to change their physical beings to approximate some model set up by others, in the name of perceived economic or social advance, even their own.

Third: People will find ways to differentiate themselves, to stand out, to be individuals, because that's part of human nature.

Fourth, and finally: The premise that we will be a better nation, a more unified nation, if we all look the same, is suspect.

Now what does this hypothetical world, this hypothetical Congresswoman and her proposal have to do with language, and more to the point, with language and discrimination? People will immediately claim that language cannot stand in for height

and weight in this story. The argument will go that language is an ethereal, mutable thing, something we learn, something within our control. Height and weight are biological facts of the physical world, determined by genetics and nutrition in the first line, and by will and habit only secondarily. Language – which languages we speak, and how we speak them – is a matter of choice, people will argue, whereas height is not.

In the course of this book I will argue that language has more in common with height and weight than is readily apparent, and that the same reservations which are so self-evident when we talk about manipulation of our physical bodies can and must be applied to discourse about language, and the manipulation and evaluation of language. Language, a possession all human collectives have in common, is more than a tool for communication of facts between two or more persons. It is the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities. It may not be as tangible as height and weight, but the way we use language is more complex and meaningful than any single fact about our bodies.

The degree of control we have over language is limited. We can choose to be polite or obtuse, to use forms of address which will flatter or insult, to use gender-neutral language or language that is inflammatory; we can consciously use vocabulary which is easily understood, or we can purposefully mislead with language. But there are many dimensions of language which are not subject to conscious or direct control. And still, as speakers we are obsessed with the idea of authority over language: we talk a great deal about language as if it were an indispensable but often wayward and unpredictable servant, in need of our constant attention and vigilance if the job is to get done.

Crucial questions have been raised here which will occupy the rest of this study:

- What is the relationship between language and social identity? How do we use language to construct “self” and “other”?
- What is or is not mutable about language, specifically about phonetics and phonology (accent)?
- Do individuals have language rights which render the question of mutability irrelevant? That is, is it desirable or even possible to balance the individual’s language rights with the needs of the community? Is this an appropriate matter for majority rule, or is it an area where the tyranny of the majority is a real threat, and individual liberties must be invoked?
- Who claims authority to make these decisions, how do they manage to do this, and why do people let them?

All of these questions are important to this study, but the last question is perhaps the most complex and difficult one. There is a common conception that there is a good English, and following from that, bad English. Further, there is a good deal of consensus on who speaks good English, and who has authority to decide what is good. While anyone would anticipate heated debate on the height/weight legislation (who has the authority to decide what an ideal person looks like, and on what aesthetic, biological or other grounds?), it is interesting to note that there is little debate at all about who sets the standards for spoken and written language, standards which have been the focus of legislation, standards which affect our everyday lives.

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1           Before we can set out on an exploration of these issues, however, there must be some  
2 common ground, built of established facts about language structure and function. Be  
3 prepared to give up some dearly held beliefs – things your teachers and parents and  
4 mentors told you – as you forge ahead.  
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# The linguistic facts of life

# 1

To disarm the strong and arm the weak would be to change the social order which it is my job to preserve. Justice is the means by which established injustices are sanctioned.

Anatole France, *Crainquebille* ([1901] 1949: iv)

All over the world, right at this moment, very young children are acquiring a first language, and every one of them is going through the same stages at just about the same ages. A child in Papua New Guinea and a child in Carson City, Nevada, born on the same day, will mirror one another as they go through those stages, even if one of them is acquiring Sign Language and the other a spoken language.<sup>1</sup> In Nairobi or El Paso, Okinawa or Bruges, the pattern is the same. It was the same for you, and for me and for those who come after us.

One of the most important linguistic insights of the last century was quite simple: this species-wide, universal phenomenon could not be coincidental. Noam Chomsky proposed what now seems obvious:

The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling or “hypothesis-formulating” ability of unknown character and complexity.

(Chomsky 1959: 62)

In other words, our brains are hard-wired for language; it's in our DNA. A child has the innate capacity to acquire language, something like a blueprint in the mind that makes it possible to recognize and absorb the structural patterns of language. He or she uses the data available in the environment to build a mother tongue by filling in and adapting those blueprints. Better understanding of this process came with the identification of one (and as yet, the only identified) of the genes that contribute to the language faculty. The FOXP2 gene was isolated by means of neuropsychological, neuroimaging and genetic investigations of three generations of one family with severe speech and language disorders (Gopnik 1990; Vargha-Khadem and Liégeois 2007).<sup>2</sup>

So while the primary focus in this study is American English, the language phenomena discussed here are relevant to every language community and every human being.<sup>3</sup> To understand these bigger issues, you will need to be familiar with some of those basic universal facts about the structure and function of human language. These are things you do not know, unless you've studied linguistics, in the same way you do not know how your brain causes your hand to turn the page of this book unless you've studied anatomy, physiology and neurology.

Some of the things you read here may seem at first counter-intuitive or just plain wrong, and in fact there are some obstacles to laying out these ideas.



American English

Linguists<sup>4</sup> do not form a homogenous club. Like any other group of scholars divided by a common subject matter, there are great rivalries, ancient quarrels, picky arguments, and plain differences of opinion. It could hardly be otherwise in a discipline diverse enough to include topics such as neurological structures and linguistic capacity, grammaticalized strategies for encoding social information in systems of address, and creolization. Thus it should be no surprise that those who study the rules which generate the ordering of words into sentences (syntacticians and cognitive grammarians, for example) are often openly disdainful of each other's approach, on theoretical grounds, and of the study of the social life of language, more generally. Linguists concerned with the relationship between structured variation in language and social identity (socio-linguists, variationists, some anthropological linguists) chide both syntacticians and cognitive grammarians for what they see as unreasonable abstractions and lack of reproducible results; phoneticians go about their business of understanding and theorizing the way humans produce and perceive sound – the architects and engineers of linguistics – and wonder what all the noise is about; historical linguists concern themselves with the written data of lost language communities and write complex formulas for the reconstruction of sounds that might have been heard around the early Roman explorations of central Europe, or in more extreme cases, when people first wandered from Asia to the North American land mass.

However, there is a great deal that linguists do agree about. For example, the statement *All living languages change* is one that no academic linguist would deny, unless they were to ask for a definition of “living” and to debate the parameters and implications of that term, just for the fun of it. And, of course, not all linguists find the fact that all living languages change to be equally interesting or worthy of study. The very subject of this book – how people think about language, how and why they try to control it, to what ends, and with what social repercussions – has received comparatively little attention.

Traditionally, linguists draw a strict line in the sand. They stand on one side with what they hope is their own objective, analytic approach to the study of language; on the other side they see prescriptivists who have a shallow understanding of human language, and whose primary purpose is to exert an authority that they have not earned (but see Chapter 5 for Lakoff's discussion of rationality as a philosophy).

More recently, however, linguists have been putting aside this strict division in recognition of the fact that how people think about language – no matter how ill-founded such beliefs might be – is in fact relevant to the study of language as a social construct.

Dennis Preston has produced a large body of work on the way attitudes toward language are relevant to the study of variation and change. He sees the juxtaposition as a matter of focus: is the study oriented toward the participants (speakers), or is the approach analyst-centric?

What linguists believe about standards matters very little; what non-linguists believe constitutes precisely that cognitive reality which needs to be described in a responsible sociolinguistics – one which takes speech-community attitudes and perception (as well as performance) into account (Preston 1993b: 26).

We begin with those linguistic facts of life that will be crucial to the issues raised in the course of this book:

- All spoken language changes over time.
- All spoken languages are equal in terms of linguistic potential.
- Grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and independent issues.

- Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally and functionally fundamentally different creatures.
- Variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level, and much of that variation serves an emblematic purpose.

This small collection of facts is where most linguists would come together. The irony is that where linguists settle down to an uneasy truce, non-linguists take up the battle cry. The least disputed issues around language structure and function, the ones linguists argue about least, are those which are most often challenged by non-linguists, and with the greatest vehemence and emotion.

Here I am concerned primarily with common beliefs and attitudes toward variation in American English (AE), and from there, I hope to demonstrate how such attitudes influence personal and institutionalized policy and practice, with very real severe consequences. This distinction between individual and institutionalized effects is quite purposeful, and the reason for that is laid out in *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (Hill 2008), Jane Hill's excellent and very detailed look at these topics from her viewpoint as an anthropological linguist:

Critical theorists do not deny that individual beliefs figure in racism. But we prefer to emphasize its collective, cultural dimensions, and to avoid singling out individuals and trying to decide whether they are racists or not. Furthermore, critical theorists insist that ordinary people who do not share White supremacist beliefs can still talk and behave in ways that advance the projects of White racism.

(Hill 2008: 7)

## All spoken language changes

All language changes over time, in all linguistic subsystems: sounds (phonetics, phonology); the structure of words (morphology, lexicon), the way sentences are put together (syntax), and meaning (semantics). Only moribund, dead languages (languages that have no native speakers) are static.<sup>5</sup> This is as true in Asia as it is in on the North American continent, as it is for every language in the world.

Linguists base this assertion on observation, experimentation, and deduction, so that the statement *all living languages change* is not a matter of faith or opinion or aesthetics, but observable fact. And yet, some people – some of you reading this right now – are doubtful. There are many people who are uncomfortable with the idea that they cannot control all aspects of language.

For me as a sociolinguist, the interesting thing about this question is how it came to be asked in the first place. Why do so many people feel threatened by the idea of language change? Why do they contest the idea with so much emotion? How did the idea of a perfect, unchanging language become so deeply instilled? Even the most idealistic and nostalgic of language observers cannot argue that Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, Woolf, Wharton, Morrison and Erdrich (to take us from the fourteenth to the twenty-first century), some of the men and women who wrote what is commonly regarded as the great literature of the English-speaking world, all wrote the same English.

To take it one step further: Toni Morrison<sup>6</sup> does not write or talk like Shakespeare wrote and talked. Few people would claim that because that is true, Morrison's command



of the language is faulty, that the English she speaks and writes is bad, less efficient, less capable of carrying out the functions for which it is needed. And still people will take up the battle cry and declare war on language change. All those attempts – and there have been a lot of them – are doomed to failure, unless they are instituted by means of genocide.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes languages die a less sudden death, for example, when the community of speakers who use them disperse, succumb to plague, or otherwise are forcibly assimilated into dominant cultures (as in the case of most of the languages indigenous to the American continent); languages are born through the processes of pidginization and subsequent creolization.

Language standardization could be characterized as an attempt to stop language change, or at least, to fossilize language by means of controlling variation. We'll continue to explore that idea as a part of an in-depth consideration of the ideological structures which make standardization seem like such a good idea.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that what we know about the history of English is subject to ideological retellings. It has been widely observed that when histories are written, they focus on the dominant class.<sup>8</sup> In the context of this study, that idea can be extended to language: the history of a language is written as the history of its language ideology. You may have heard this idea phrased differently, for example: histories are written by the winners, or even more concisely: consider the source.

Generally studies of the development of the language over time are very narrowly focused on the smallest portion of speakers: those with power and resources to control the distribution of information. Crystal's *The Stories of English* avoids this pitfall by looking at language in all its variation and stratification (Crystal 2005). So every living language changes, and every variety of every living language changes. It is important to keep this in mind when considering arguments put forward by prescriptivists based on a faulty and partial knowledge of the history of English.

### **All spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms**

All spoken languages are equally capable of conveying a full range of ideas and experiences, and of developing to meet new needs as they arise. This claim by linguists is usually countered by non-linguists with examples of languages which have been deemed less sophisticated.

I was writing the other day about a dull evening at the theater, but “dull” wasn't the word I wanted. Rodale's Synonym Finder gave me, among many others, vacuous, dense, obtuse, thick, slow, indifferent, sluggish, lethargic, torpid, lifeless, listless, apathetic, drowsy, tedious, tiresome, boring, wearisome, uninteresting, bland, insipid, jejune, vapid, prosaic, lackluster, anodyne, innocuous, soporific, oscitant and blah. Does anyone want to try that in Choctaw? Or in Spanish, Swahili or Norse?

(Kilpatrick 1999)

Not so very long ago, in the larger scheme of things, English speakers did not have the vocabulary to talk about chemical weapons, aeronautical engineering, or genetic mapping. When our technology evolved to the point that we needed to discuss such things, so did our language.

Language is incredibly flexible and responsive; we make or borrow what we do not have. In this flexibility and ability to change and adapt when necessity or will arises, all languages

– all varieties of any given language – are equal. If through an unexpected shift in the world’s economy the Arawakan speakers of Peru suddenly were sole possessors of some resource everyone else needed, then Arawakan would develop a variety of new vocabularies and grammatical strategies to deal with their new power on the world stage.

It is simply not a useful exercise to compare Swahili to Tagalog to Finnish in order to determine which one is the better or more efficient language: these are not cars. We cannot compare manufacturing costs, gas mileage, performance on rough terrain. Each language is suited to its community of speakers; each language changes in pace as that community and the demands of the speakers evolve. This applies not just to languages which are unrelated to one another, but also to varieties of a single language. Orange County and the north-west side of Chicago, Boston Southie and the dialect of Smith’s Island in Chesapeake Bay, while very different varieties of English in many ways, are all equally efficient as languages, although they do not enjoy the same degree of respect.

If efficiency and clarity in communication are the ultimate goal in language use, then it might be argued that English is neither efficient nor clear in terms of its pronouns, as a speaker cannot make clear, in purely grammatical terms, if she is addressing her comments to one speaker or more when she says: “I’d like to buy you dinner.”

Of even more interest is the fact that the exchange in English happens without any indication of the social relationship between the speaker and the person or persons she is inviting. She might be a boss talking to two secretaries after a long day, or a mother talking to her son on the phone. She might be talking to a man she sees every day on the bus on her way home from work.

Other languages are not so lax: the Romance languages (and many others) distinguish between singular and plural personal pronouns, as well as between formal and informal uses.

Many languages also have a complex system of honorifics which requires that speakers situate themselves in social space in relationship to the person addressed. That is, the speaker will choose among as many as a dozen or more words or suffixes or tones to add to the utterance, and with that choice he or she will indicate the degree of respect (based on age, profession, kinship or other factors), friendship, or lack of respect felt toward the other person. In Thailand, young teenage girls – socially very low in the scheme of things – routinely end their sentences with the tag *I, little rat* (Simpson 1997).

Another example of a lack or hole in the structure of English is the fact that there is no impersonal third person singular pronoun. To the dismay of prescriptivists, we have only he or she, and thus must somehow cope in situations where we do not want to indicate gender. From the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2003): “Though some writers are comfortable with the occasional use of they as a singular pronoun, some are not, and it is better to do the necessary work to recast a sentence or, other options having been exhausted, use he or she.”

In fact, the use of *they* (their, them) as singular pronouns is very old. Consider the following examples, dating back to early translations of the Bible:

A person can’t help their birth.

(Jane Austen, *Emma*)

Whoever it is, I won’t see them tonight.

(M.E. Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*)

God send every one their heart’s desire!

(William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*)



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Northwest Chicago,  
Boston Southie,  
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(Chesapeake Bay)

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Who is in love with her? Who makes you their confidant?

(*King James Bible*, Matthew 18:35)

There are ways to avoid using *they* or *their*, but the usage of singular *they* is very firmly established. Using both female and male pronouns is considered awkward (*Whoever it is, I won't see him or her tonight*). Nor does it work to use the neutral single pronoun: (*\*Whoever it is, I won't see it tonight*).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, *The Chicago Manual of Style* and other authorities continue to take the stance that singular *they* is a recent and unhappy development.

It is a credit to the power of standard language ideology (SLI) that many people – and you may be one of them – will look at these examples and say, well, yes, now that you mention it, English is rather inefficient in these cases. But let's consider some facts.

First, a language which does not have an overt strategy for dealing with a grammatical or semantic distinction will have other ways of doing just that. We cannot claim that English speakers are incapable of making themselves clear on just who it is they are inviting to dinner. Social and regional varieties of English have developed a multitude of strategies for dealing with the singular/plural distinction. For example, in my own variety of American English, acquired in Chicago, we say *you/you guys*, in Belfast and some parts of the U.S. *you/youse*; in much of the southern US *you/you'uns* or *ya'll*; in parts of Pennsylvania *you/yousns*.

An additional strategy employed by all speakers of English involves a range of lexical choices that might not engender negative social reactions, but which show strategic maneuvering: “Would you folks/people/chaps/fellows/kids like to . . .?”

These all come from regionally or socially restricted varieties of English. Idealized \*Standard American English (a term we'll look at shortly; see p. 62) is bound, at least theoretically, by adherence to an inflexible grammar and thus is unable to change to address gaps in the language system. So then, isn't it reasonable to say that a standardized English is not as efficient as the social and regional dialects?

This is a tempting argument, but it cannot survive close examination. All spoken language will cope with ambiguity of all kinds. If socially motivated rules forbid reliance on certain grammatical strategies or lexical terms, then discourse, intonation and body language strategies can be called into play:

“Would you [single eye contact] like to have a meal with me?”

“Would you [multiple eye contact] like to have a meal with me?”

It is an odd thing that we should think about language as if it were a machine invented to serve the purpose of communication, and thus open to criticism on the same grounds in which we talk about our lawnmowers and food processors. In the next sections we will see that these misconceptions have less to do with inherent qualities of language than they do with a preoccupation with form (as opposed to function), which in turn originates in part with struggles over authority in the determination of language and social identity.

### **Grammaticality does not equal communicative effectiveness**

Linguists and non-linguists both see grammar as a set of rules which must be obeyed, but they differ on the nature and origination of those rules. When linguists talk about grammar, they are thinking about the rule-driven structure of language. On the basis of



Chicago, Belfast,  
Midwest, Far west,  
Southern US,  
Pennsylvania

those rules, individuals generate sentences. Children have acquired a working knowledge of this grammar of their native language by the age of 4.

A linguist would not call any of the following example sentences ungrammatical:

- If you're going out, I'm coming with.
- I might could stop at the store on the way home.
- You know Vicky be working after school.
- For reals, he won the lottery!
- If I had had three of them, you could've taken one.
- Here are five things Joe should have went to jail for.
- I would of helped if I had known.
- We underestimated them.
- That's just what Maria said to Marcos and I.
- Ain't nobody can beat me no how.
- Which of the three boys was less troublesome?
- The house needs painted.
- He's the kind of guy that's always borrowing money.
- The data does not support your conclusion.
- Put it in your pocket.

The 'mistakes' in these sentences would be more or less obvious to people who concern themselves with such things, with the possible exception of the last two examples. In those cases, many academics probably would argue that the noun *data* must be used as a plural, with a plural verb (*The data do not support your conclusion*); particularly hardline prescriptivists would be sure to point out that things are put *into* a pocket.

For non-linguists, grammaticality is used in a much broader and fluid sense. It encompasses the spoken and written languages, and extends to matters of style and even punctuation. However, most important differences between the two approaches to grammar have to do with the concept of socially motivated grammaticality.

Pinker uses the example of a taxicab to illustrate the distinction. As it is a useful illustration I have adapted it here: "The Taxicab Maxim: A taxicab must obey the laws of physics, but it can flout the laws of the state of Michigan (or Massachusetts, or London, etc.)" (Pinker 1994b). To take a closer look at this idea, please consider the sentences in Table 1.1, and the way they are evaluated.

The last four examples are where the linguist and the non-linguist usually part ways. As any of these sentences could be – and are – heard in casual conversation every day on

Table 1.1 Grammaticality judgment comparison

	Grammaticality according to		Is the speaker's intent clear?	
	Linguist	Layperson	Linguist	Layperson
Colorless green ideas sleep furiously	Yes	Yes	No	No
Furiously sleep ideas green colorless	No	No	No	No
That house needs painted	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
I seen it yesterday when I got hom	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
My daughter is taller than me	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Dr. Hallahan might could give you a call	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

American streets, they are grammatical. A prescriptivist will take issue with the way the verbs have been used but even a prescriptivist could not claim that the meaning was unclear – we know exactly what it means if we hear somebody say *my sister is taller than me*. The hardline prescriptivist would say that the correct usage is *my sister is taller than I*. Formulated this way, the speaker would not be seen as well-spoken, but as odd or pretentious or perhaps, a non-native speaker.

Chomsky's famous demonstration of the difference between grammatical and well-formed was first published in 1957, and hasn't yet been replaced by a better one. Sentences (1) and (2) are equally nonsensical, but any speaker of English will recognize that only the former is grammatical.

- 1 Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
- 2 Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.

(Chomsky 1957)

“\*Furiously sleep ideas green colorless” is not grammatical for any speaker of English, descriptivist or prescriptivist. No child growing up in an English-speaking community would produce this sentence, just as you never have to remind a child about other points of language-internal, rule-governed grammaticality. When is the last time you heard somebody say to a child something like: “Susie! Stop putting your articles after your nouns!”

The concept of grammaticality might seem to be vague, because the methodology is so very simple: a person is asked if a given sentence suits their personal sense of well-formedness. A set of four sentences will help demonstrate how this works:

- 1 Sam put a red scarf on the dog.
- 2 George took the dog.
- 3 Linda asked what Sam put the red scarf on.
- 4 \*George took the dog that Linda asked what Sam put a red scarf on.

The first three sentences are grammatical (they sound well-formed, as something you might say or hear said) for native speakers of English. The third one will make most people stop and think, but it can be unraveled. The last one cannot.

This process is used extensively by theoretical syntacticians, a field in which linguists are not interested in variation or change in language. When theoretical syntacticians come across native speakers who disagree on the grammaticality of a given utterance (which will happen quite often), they may note that as “noise,” but otherwise abstract away from it.

Socially constructed grammar is what your parents or teachers were targeting when they corrected your language use. If Susie loudly announces “I gotta pee” during religious services, or if she says “I ain’t got none,” when she is asked about pets, some adult nearby may correct her, as you were possibly corrected (so long as the first language you acquired was English). Everyone seems to have memories of this kind, perhaps because such corrections can be quite harsh.

Linguists often keep notes on overheard conversations that illustrate such points. For example, in 1989, in Borders Books in Ann Arbor, an expensively dressed woman went rushing by, her son – maybe 10 years old – running to keep up with her. Over her shoulder she said to him: “I hate it when you use such ignorant, slovenly language. We don’t talk like that.”

I didn't hear what the boy had said to get this kind of rebuke, but the vitriol in the mother's voice, the dismissive tone in the way she corrected her son stuck with me. Suppose the boy had said, "Dad says the house needs painted."<sup>10</sup> This is a construction common in Michigan and some other areas in the Midwest, but it usually strikes non-Michiganders as odd. It still strikes me as odd, though I lived there for more than ten years. This usage is strongly marked for both region and socioeconomic status (Murray and Simon 1999).

If a boy growing up in Michigan used this construction, why would a parent correct him so abruptly? It's not that she didn't understand the message he was trying to get across; just the opposite. She was reacting to the social markers her son was using. The rules violated were not linguistic in nature; the objections rose out of socially constructed concepts of proper English and good language. *I do not identify with Michiganders*, the mother was saying, *and neither do you. Stop talking like them.*

Social conventions are a tremendously powerful source in our lives. Consider for a moment: A man wakes up one morning, ready to go to work. He'll be giving a speech he's been preparing for weeks, to an audience of a thousand employees. Everything hangs on this speech. His life goals, his career. Everything. If he handles it right, he'll be promoted to CEO. If he doesn't, his career at this company – and perhaps everywhere – is over. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and he's prepared for it.

Except when he goes to his closet to get the polished shoes, freshly ironed shirt and crisp new suit, they aren't there. In fact, none of his clothes are there. He searches through the whole house, and finds not so much as one of his socks, anywhere. The only piece of clothing is a dress hanging in the guest room closet along with a pair of matching pumps, which look like they will actually fit him. The dress and pumps – and the boxers he wore to bed – are all he has.

His cell phone is dead, something he realizes just as the electricity goes out. No way to call for help. No neighbors within shouting distance. His car is missing – one more disaster – so he'll have to take the bus, too.

Does he wear the dress?

Our social conventions develop over time, along with a complex set of rationalizations. If a woman stands up in the middle of a restaurant eating linguini with clam sauce with her hands, the owner would probably feel justified in asking the customer to change her behavior or leave. Most people would consider this a reasonable request.

But what if when the owner went up to the woman to ask her to leave, she turned into a mouse and disappeared between the floorboards?

This possibility had not occurred to you, for the simple reason that it violates all the things we understand about the physical universe. The woman eating with her hands is ignoring the laws of socially acceptable behavior in public; when she turns into a mouse, she is flouting the rules of physics. Thus it is necessary to make a distinction between linguistic grammaticality and socially constructed grammaticality.<sup>11</sup>

I have put forward as facts that any language embedded in a viable speech community is capable of adapting to any linguistic need, and that every native speaker produces utterances which are by definition grammatical. What I have not claimed and cannot claim, is that message content can be judged in the same way. Take, for example, the sentence:

If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure.

This sentence is grammatical in every sense of the word, but it makes no sense. It sounds well-formed but there isn't any content.



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The fact is that each utterance, while grammatical, may or may not fulfill the purpose for which it was conceived and formulated, for a wide variety of reasons. Consider the following hypothetical responses (B1–B5) to a simple question, (A):

A: Can I have your phone number?

B1: I'll have a beer.

B2: Uh, well, I'm not sure – what is my phone number, it's – ah –, I don't –.

B3: What's a phone, and why does it have a number?

B4: When hell freezes over.

B5: It's 555-3333.

To determine linguistic grammaticality, a very simple question suffices: Can this utterance be generated by the grammar of the language? Each of the responses above is a grammatical construction for my own variety of English, and for many others. But an evaluation of content and socially construed well-formedness or efficiency moves to issues of intent, composition, and delivery. In each case, we could ask a number of questions to evaluate the responses given.

- Is the message clear?
- Is it easily broken down into its constituents?
- Does one point follow logically from the previous point?
- Is it couched in concise language and free of excess and overly complex construction?
- Is it persuasive?
- Is the delivery pleasing?

The five possible responses provided for the question “Can I have your phone number?” could be judged on the basis of clarity, logic, conciseness, persuasiveness, and delivery, but not until we have more information, because the communicative intent of both the question posed and the answer received are multidimensional. It is possible to imagine many underlying purposes to the question “Can I have your phone number?” depending on the context in which it is asked, and the relationship of speaker to listener. In one possible situation (in which one person is trying to establish a romantic or sexual relationship), the answer “Uh, well, I'm not sure – what is my phone number, it's – ah –, I don't –” may not be concise (in the sense of “succinct”), but the underlying message is, after all, a complex one: *I have evaluated you as a potential romantic and/or sexual partner and I find that you are not acceptable, but I have no wish to insult you directly or embarrass you, and in fact I am afraid of the social consequences of doing so.*

Within its social context, the reply is very clear, and it is also concise in that it gets its message across with fewer lexical items than the alternate proposed. Alternatively, *When hell freezes over* is a longer answer than *no*, but it is also much more descriptive and informative. A simple negation leaves room for interpretation of motive; *When hell freezes over* leaves very little doubt about the speaker's feelings.

In Europe in the medieval and early modern periods, liberal arts consisted in part of the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the trivium), where rhetoric is taken to mean language used effectively and persuasively. This concern with effective language persists, although the term remains, as always, a subjective one.<sup>12</sup> If effectiveness in language is the sum of more specific qualifiers (clarity, logic, conciseness, persuasiveness, and delivery), then calculation of effectiveness is complicated by the fact that these are subjective rather

than objective measures. Whether or not these are reasonable demands of language as a vehicle of communication is also debatable. Is language more effective when sentences are short, or long? When it is spoken fast, or slow? When the vocabulary used is primarily Germanic (help!), or Romance (assistance!)?

I will argue at various points in this book that the evaluation of language effectiveness can sometimes serve as a way of judging not the message, but the social identity of the messenger.

Political debate provides daily examples of highly educated and powerful people who speak what is generally considered \*Standard American English (\*SAE). Some of them do use language clearly and concisely, while others seem incapable of expressing simple ideas clearly. When the media draw attention to a politician's language use, not the content, but the variety of English itself – they are not accusing that politician of lying under oath or running Ponzi schemes or of dereliction of duty. Such commentary is not about policy or law; it is delivered in the manner of the finger-wagging way of children on the playground, the ones who police the social structure and keep people in their place. The fact is, the variety of English a person speaks, highly regarded or stigmatized, standard-like or vernacular, cannot predict the quality and effectiveness of any given utterance or that person's worth as a communicator.

What can be predicted is the fact that listeners will make assumptions about the speaker on the basis of language markers that signal alliance to certain social groups, primarily those having to do with race, ethnicity and economic factors.

### **Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally and functionally fundamentally different creatures**

In the history of mankind, widespread literacy is a relatively new development, one that trailed along behind technological advances in printing and the manufacture of paper.

Early printers had some things to work out, including the question of norms and standardization. If Caxton had to print the Bible in ten different dialects of English, there would be little or no profit in the venture, which was, of course, not acceptable. The solution was to print the Bible in one variety of English, and then to convince everybody that that was the best kind of English. Thus began the movement toward language norms and standardization of the printed (and then, written) language.

It seems a matter of logic and convenience from a business perspective, but this narrowing-down and standardizing process was a long and arduous one. Who was going to make decisions about spellings and grammatical structures? Who was going to teach them, who would impose them, and how?

As it became possible to make key religious, literary and legal documents available on a wider basis, the standardized written language became a commodity of increasing value. In the first line, the control of this commodity was in the hands of those who were on the front line of teaching reading and writing. Trained clerks and lowly teachers claimed authority, and began to make a living out of telling people what their language should look and sound like. The job was not only to teach writing, but more important, to instill a respect for institutionalized authority in matters of language. This is still the case today.

The most salient feature which distinguishes an abstracted, idealized standard written or printed English from the reality of spoken language is conformity or the suppression



Standard American  
English

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of variation. That suppression is not easily achieved. It is a battle continually fought, and never completely won.

For linguists, the spoken language is of primary (and often, exclusive) interest. In this we linguists are pretty much alone; for most people involved in education – and many others, as well – the written language continues as a commodity of huge dimensions and complexity:

Although the bias that speech is primary over writing has been extremely important in guiding research efforts within linguistics, it has not been widely accepted outside of linguistics. In fact, the historical view that written, literary language is true language continues as the dominant lay perception to the present time. Our children need to study English at school, which includes written composition and the prescriptive rules of writing, not speech . . . We expect our grammars and dictionaries to present the correct forms of written language; [when they instead ] present both literate and colloquial vocabulary they are severely criticized for destroying the standards of English.

(Biber 1988: 5–6)

The primacy of the spoken language is easy enough to bolster with factual evidence, but it is perhaps the single most difficult concept for non-linguists to fully grasp and accept. In our minds the spoken and written languages are so intertwined that we seem sometimes incapable of distinguishing between them. A LanguageLog post (“Pronouncing it by the book”)<sup>13</sup> provides examples of the kind of extreme emotional investment some people put in the idea of the superiority of the written language:

She was from Northern California, but had been born in the Midwest, and she acknowledged, “Everyone always assumes I’m British or something just because I’m more careful to pronounce words properly. It only sounds unusual because everyone simply ignores how words are spelled anymore.” Everyone else at the table simply nodded as though that made all the sense in the world.



British

The internet abounds with examples of people who are proud to promote the superiority of the written language, and at the same time, to conflate written and spoken languages, adding punctuation to the mix: Nothing destroys precision grammar and correct usage like raw, unmitigated anger [ . . . ] excessive use of capital letters, abundance of exclamation points, and lack of proper punctuation.<sup>14</sup>

In this weblog writer’s view, too many exclamation points renders a piece of writing ungrammatical. I dislike exclamation points myself, but never once have I failed to understand a document because of them. Punctuation is irrelevant to the kind of work sociolinguists do, and has nothing to do with grammaticality. And yet, arguments about punctuation and the written word rage on: the misuse of semicolons, the insidious serial comma, the virus-like greengrocers’ apostrophe sneaking into possessive nouns to herald the imminent fall of western civilization.<sup>15</sup>

Arguments about usage are routinely settled by pulling out reference books (*The Chicago Manual of Style*, for example) or dictionaries. The dictionary is regarded as the highest authority in matters of language. Few people ever stop to ask how it is that the dictionary has taken – or has been given – such absolute authority. For the most part, individuals feel entitled to make pronouncements about language and to base those

assertions on dictionaries or vague, never defined authorities. As in the case of a character on Showtime's *Californication*. Here the irreverent, quick-witted, curmudgeonly Hank Moody (played by David Duchovny) is rebelling against the intrusion of computers into life and language:

People. . . they don't write anymore – they blog. Instead of talking, they text, no punctuation, no grammar: LOL this and LMFAO that. You know, it just seems to me it's just a bunch of stupid people pseudo-communicating with a bunch of other stupid people in a proto-language that resembles more what cavemen used to speak than the King's English.

Hank is a writer and as such, considers himself an authority on all matters having to do with language, written or spoken. He conflates the two without a pause or hesitation, and he is resentful because he believes others are ruining the language he (and the King) command. The offenders use language, as he sees it, without grammar. Note also that he refers to the *King's* English in spite of the fact that there is currently no king, but a queen in England. This is not insignificant, given Moody's character.

This kind of assertion about language, no matter how lacking in consistency or logic or factual underpinning, is received enthusiastically and repeated widely. In this case, Hank's testy ode to the decline of English was cited more than 3,000 times on the internet within a few months of the episode's first broadcast.

Prince Charles often demonstrates the same tendency in public speeches, as we see in the following example given in 1989 when he was judging a reading competition:

If English is spoken in Heaven (as the spread of English as a world language makes more likely each year) God undoubtedly employs Cranmer as his speech-writer. The angels of the lesser ministries probably use the language of the New English Bible and the Alternative Service Book for internal memos.

I suppose we must be fair and point out that the Prince of Wales does not automatically assume that English is spoken in heaven. Nevertheless, his further assumptions are quite interesting. Those language authorities he cites as exemplary all draw their power from religious institutions. Thomas Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury (the head of the Anglican Church) under Henry VIII; the Prince of Wales offers Cranmer as an authority because he simplified and translated the Latin prayer books into one English volume, the Book of Common Prayer. Then Henry VIII got a real lock on things by coming up with England's Act of Uniformity, which made the Book of Common Prayer the only acceptable book of its kind.

It is also interesting that the written documents which are cited here as appropriate models for the spoken language are British ones (in other places, Prince Charles has been very critical of the damage that has been done to English by its speakers on the North American continent). Most important to the discussion immediately at hand is the way this picture of language perfection takes as a departure point the idea that the various mediums of language are one and the same. Here we see mention of spoken language, speeches (which can be given as planned but extemporaneous speech, or the reading out loud of written language), and written language.

This proclamation by the future king of England builds on a tradition which goes back to Socrates, who suggested that the gods took a direct interest in language:

1 *Hermogenes*: And where does Homer say anything about names, and what does he  
2 say?

3 *Socrates*: He often speaks of them – notably and nobly in the places where he distin-  
4 guishes the different names which gods and men give the same things. Does he  
5 not in these passages make a remarkable statement about the correctness of  
6 names? For the gods must clearly be supposed to call things by their right and  
7 natural names, do you not think so?

8 (Hamilton and Cairns 1961: 429–430)

9  
10 More recently, in an event which is almost certainly apocryphal,<sup>16</sup> Miriam “Ma” Ferguson,  
11 the first female governor of the State of Texas, expressed the decisive argument against  
12 bilingual education (and unwittingly, for more and better history and geography instruc-  
13 tion) by drawing on the (for her) ultimate authority: “If English was good enough for Jesus  
14 Christ,” she declared, “then it’s good enough for the schoolchildren of Texas” (*Handbook*  
15 *of Texas* 2009).

16 It has been pointed out that “writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing  
17 the same things; rather, they are ways of doing different things” (Halliday 1989: xv). That  
18 is, we write things that tax our ability to remember (genealogies, instruction manuals, legal  
19 documents), or to project our thoughts through space and time. We speak everything else.  
20 But aren’t they the same thing, just as water is water whether it flows, or freezes so that  
21 we can walk on it? Isn’t it just a matter of presentation? Can’t speech and writing be treated  
22 as different manifestations of the same mental phenomenon? Wouldn’t spoken language  
23 be more efficient if we treated it like written language?

24 Writing systems are a strategy developed in response to demands arising from social,  
25 technological and economic change. The purpose of writing systems is to convey decon-  
26 textualized information. We write love letters, laundry lists, historical monographs, novels,  
27 mythologies, wound care manuals, menus, out to lunch signs, biochemistry textbooks. We  
28 write these things down because our memories are not capable of storing such masses of  
29 information for ourselves or those who come after us, or because we consider the message  
30 one worthy of preserving past a particular point in time.

31 The demands made on written language are considerable: we want it to span time and  
32 space, and we want it to do that in a social vacuum, without the aid of paralinguistic features  
33 and often without shared context of any kind. Thus, the argument goes, written language  
34 needs to be free of variation: it must be consistent in every way, from spelling to sentence  
35 structure.<sup>17</sup>

36 We might think of the difference between spoken and written language (see Table 1.2)  
37 as the difference between walking and machines built for the purpose of transporting  
38 human beings. Unless a child suffers a terrible turn of fate, she will learn to walk without  
39 focused instruction. No one must show her how to put one foot ahead of the other. She  
40 will experiment with balance and gait, and learn to move herself physically to pursue food  
41 and shelter, to come in contact with another human being, to explore her world. Over  
42 time, the human race developed a series of technologies to improve the ability to move  
43 themselves: they tamed horses, camels, oxen; they built carts, carriages, boats, trains,  
44 bicycles, cars, airplanes, skateboards. All of these things are faster than walking, and, if  
45 speed is the primary criterion by which we judge efficiency of movement, they are superior  
46 to the skill all humans have in common.

47 But it would not occur to us to set up standards for walking on the basis of the speed of  
48 any of these vehicles: it is a physical impossibility to walk 60 miles an hour. We cannot

Table 1.2 Written vs. spoken language traits

<i>Spoken language . . .</i>	<i>Written language . . .</i>
Is an innate human capacity which is acquired by all human children who are not isolated from other language users during the critical acquisition period	Is not universal, and must be consciously and rigorously taught. It is a skill which will be acquired with differing degrees of success
Draws heavily on paralinguistic features to convey information in more than one way: tone of voice, body language, facial expression, etc.	Must use punctuation, additional lexical items or constructions when written letters alone do not suffice
Primarily carried out face-to-face between two or more persons	Is carried out as a solitary pursuit, with an audience removed in time and space
Confusion and ambiguity resolved directly by repair and confirmation procedures	Confusion and ambiguity are not immediately resolvable
Happens in a social and temporal context, and thus brings with it a great deal of background information; draws on context to complement meaning and fill in that which is not said out loud	Without context, and thus more prone to ambiguity; intolerant of ellipses
Is planned or spontaneous	Is by nature planned
Is ephemeral	Can be permanent
Inherently and unavoidably variable on every level, language internally (structure) and externally (social); exploits variation to pass on information in addition to that of the surface message	Variation is actively suppressed and discouraged

walk like we ride. Why then do we not think anything of Prince Charles telling us that in heaven, people will speak like they write, as if this were the ultimate good, the ideal?

In their seminal work on authority in language, James and Lesley Milroy point to the underlying issue which may explain – in part – why we are so willing to see the spoken language subordinated to the written.

As writing skills are difficult, our educational systems have concentrated on inculcating a relatively high degree of literacy, with little attention paid to the nature of spoken language as an everyday social activity. Training in the use of “English” . . . is usually assumed to be training in the use of written English . . . Spoken language is taken for granted. As a result of this constant emphasis on written language, there is an understandable tendency for people to believe that writing is somehow more complicated and difficult (and more important) than speech.

(Milroy and Milroy 1999: 55)

This preoccupation with the written language to the exclusion of the spoken is quite easy to document. The National Association of Teachers of English, for example, publishes guidelines for the curriculum in English on a regular basis; of the twelve points addressed, only four include mention of spoken language skills, and then in a very vague and indirect way (a topic which will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 7).

1 From the spoken to the written language is a large step; it is another significant step  
 2 from the written language to the possession of literacy.<sup>18</sup> However, the possession of a  
 3 skill and the facility to use that skill to construct a product are cultural resources not equally  
 4 available to all persons, and are heavily laden with social currencies. In the U.S., most  
 5 people do not consider oral cultures as equal to literate ones. Some scholars have argued,  
 6 with differing degrees of subtlety, that certain kinds or modes of thought cannot develop  
 7 in oral cultures, and that for this reason literate cultures are superior.

8 This type of argument has come under attack on both methodological and theoretical  
 9 grounds. One of the oldest but still most comprehensive examples of such tortured  
 10 reasoning is Bernstein's (1966) theory of restricted and elaborated codes.<sup>19</sup> Bernstein  
 11 attempted (and failed) to establish that children who spoke "elaborated" languages at home  
 12 (he called those languages syntactically complex) were more capable of logical thought  
 13 and other cognitive advantages, and that children who heard only restricted codes in the  
 14 home were at a disadvantage.<sup>20</sup>

15 It is demonstrably true that in a literate culture, illiteracy is a *social* brand like few others.  
 16 Cameron calls what goes on around the written language a *circle of intimidation*:

17 [M]astering a complex and difficult craft gives you an inbuilt incentive to defend its  
 18 practices. If I have invested time and effort learning how to write according to a  
 19 particular set of prescriptions, it will take some convincing that those prescriptions  
 20 are not necessary and desirable; to admit that the rules are both arbitrary and pointless  
 21 is to devalue my own accomplishment in mastering them.

22 (Cameron 1995: 14)

23  
 24 Gee goes a step farther when he outlines the complex associations and expectations of  
 25 literacy:

26 [L]iteracy leads to logical, analytic, critical and rational thinking, general and abstract  
 27 uses of language, a skeptical and questioning attitude, a distinction between myth and  
 28 history, the recognition of the importance of time and space, complex and modern  
 29 governments . . . political democracy and greater social equity, economic develop-  
 30 ment, wealth and productivity, political stability, urbanization, and contraception (a  
 31 lower birth rate) . . . The literacy myth is, in fact, one of the master Myths of our  
 32 society; it is foundational to how we make sense of reality, though it is not necessarily  
 33 an accurate reflection of that reality, nor does it necessarily lead to a just, equitable,  
 34 and humane world.

35 (Gee 2007a [1996]: 36)

36  
 37  
 38 The literacy myth plays a role in the subordination of the spoken language to norms  
 39 developed for the written language – norms that are in themselves arbitrary. This process  
 40 is part of what Foucault has called the disciplining of discourse, or the way we decide who  
 41 has the right to talk, and to be listened to (Foucault 1984), the major topic of interest in  
 42 the later chapters of this book.

### 43 44 45 **Variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level**

46 Spoken language varies for every speaker in terms of speech sounds, sound patterns, word  
 47 and sentence structure, intonation, and meaning, from utterance to utterance. This is true  
 48

even for those who believe themselves to speak an educated, elevated, supra-regional English.

Variation is not a frivolous or sloppy or useless feature of language.<sup>21</sup> Quite the contrary, the variants available to the speaker to choose from are not neutral, and while the choice between them may not be conscious, it is often purposeful.

There are three main sources of variation in spoken language:

- 1 *Language internal pressures*, arising in part from the mechanics of production and perception.
- 2 *External influences on language*, such as geographic mobility and social behavior subject to normative and other formative social pressures.
- 3 *Variation arising from language as a creative vehicle of free expression*.

These forces can and do function in tandem, and any good study of language change in progress will consider at least the first two together.

Variation over space is the dimension that most people seem to be aware of, but in a limited way. There are language communities of well-established, self-contained or isolated religious groups that mark their English for insider/outsider status (the Amish and Mennonites in Pennsylvania; Mormons in Utah and Arizona; Jews in Williamsburg and the greater New York City area, Hassidic Jews in Brookline, outside of Boston). There are historical language communities which remain bilingual despite outside pressures (German in parts of Michigan and Texas, French (independent of the Creole communities in Louisiana) (Figure 1.1), bilingual pockets in New England and Louisiana.

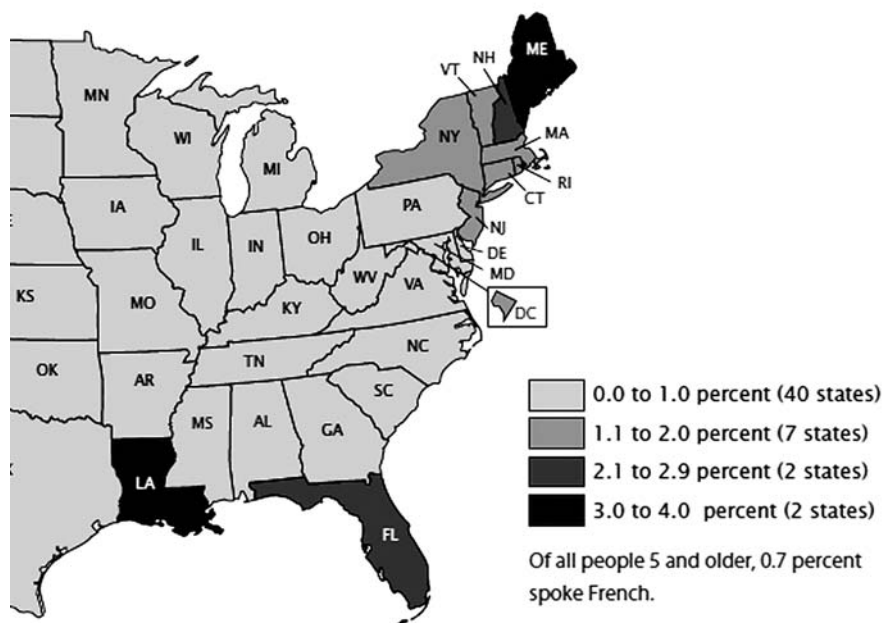


Figure 1.1 French (and French Creole) spoken at home, 2007

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey

Variation that is less likely to reach the level of consciousness has to do with the human neurological and vocal apparatus, which is architecturally and structurally universal and which accounts for the similarities in the way language is produced and perceived. As a young child acquiring language, every human being has potentially available to them the full range of possible sounds. The sounds which will eventually survive and become part of the child's language are arranged into language-specific systems, each sound standing in relation to the other sounds. In linguistic terms, the study of production and perception of speech sounds is the science of phonetics; concern with how sounds are organized into systems is called phonology.

It is in the production and perception of speech sounds as systematic entities functioning in relationship to each other that there is perhaps the greatest potential for variation in language, and following from that, variation leading to change. There are so many changes in progress at any given time that it would not be possible to catalog them all, but in Chapter 2 we consider a few changes that may well be active in your own variety of English.

To close this chapter I must point out what may seem obvious by now: linguists are outnumbered by prescriptivists, and outgunned, too. Prescriptivists are in a position to broadcast their opinions from positions of authority granted to them automatically, whereas linguists are confined to university settings and conferences. This makes it possible for prescriptivists to simply ignore – or mock – what linguists have to say about language. They make full use of this advantage and that is unlikely to change, ever.

By the end of this book you will be able to answer the crucial question for yourself: Are you comfortable with the institutional practices that are forced on individuals in the pursuit of proper English? If you are not – and not everyone will be – you must decide what you, as an individual, can do about it.

Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue until they are resisted with either words or blows, or both.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- Browse through the Speech Accent Archive.
- Listen to speech samples from places you know well, where you have lived. How does your own variety of English compare? Do the samples on the website strike you as representative? Consider submitting a sample of your own speech to add to the archive (under “how to use this site”).
- Pick one of the website resources provided above (but not the Speech Accent Archive) and report to the class on what it is, and how it might be of interest or use.
- Ask five people you don't know well why it's wrong to say “I seen it yesterday when I got home.” Do not react to their response, and don't engage in conversation. Concentrate on taking notes. In class, compare the answers you received to those other students recorded. Similarities? Differences? Does gender or age make a difference? How does this exercise illustrate the taxicab maxim, if it does at all? In his essay “Standard English a Myth? No!” Kilpatrick disputes the claim that all languages and language varieties are potentially equal, and uses this comparison to make his point: “And to assert that all languages and all

dialects 'have the same expressive potential' is to assert that the ukulele ranks with the cello" (Kilpatrick 1999). Does this strike you as a valid comparison? Why or why not?

- Milroy and Milroy (1999) state: "As writing skills are difficult, our educational systems have concentrated on inculcating a relatively high degree of literacy, with little attention paid to the nature of spoken language as an everyday social activity." Can you conceive of ways that our schools might pay more attention to developing spoken language skills? What would the goals be?
- Is FOXP2 evidence to support Chomsky's innateness hypothesis?

## Notes

- 1 Those stages are (1) babbling (repetitive consonant–verb patterns such as bababa or tatata); (2) one or two syllable words in isolation (duck, car, teddy); (3) two-word strings (more juice, get down, want that); (4) the telegraphic stage, where grammatical bits are mostly left out (Elmo kiss baby doll, Where mama going? I tie it myself). And onward to the acquisition of grammatical elements, complex structures and communicative competence.
- 2 There has been a lot of exaggeration and misinformation about FOXP2 from the popular press. It is factually incorrect to call it "the grammar gene." It does have something to do with articulation and fine motor control needed for speech. It also seems to control the behavior of some hundred other genes. FOXP2 is best understood as a starting point "for future studies of the molecular basis of language and human evolution" (source: <http://goo.gl/ucXV5>).
- 3 While the more general language issues discussed here will be applicable to all English spoken on the continent, the exploration of specific authority and prescription issues focuses on the U.S. and with very few exceptions does not draw on material from other English-speaking countries.
- 4 I refer here specifically to academic linguists. Outside of the discipline, the definition of linguist is much broader, including, among other things, a linguist as a polyglot.
- 5 Any language which is no longer acquired as a first language, and is no longer used in day-to-day communication by a community of persons is considered to be dead, whether or not it survives in a literary form. Many languages have died and left no record behind; however, there are cases where moribund languages have been revived. Hebrew is an example of a dead (or "sleeping") language coming back to life. For two thousand years, Hebrew was preserved as a written and ritualistic language of the Jewish people only, and thus was dead by the technical definition. It is now spoken as a first language by a good proportion of the population of Israel.
- 6 Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. "[Morrison] made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America."
- 7 The modern-day systematic and violent repression of the Kurdish language and culture in Turkey is one extreme example. (Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.* 1994.)
- 8 This statement is generally attributed to Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana and father of the pan-national African movement. It is also widely paraphrased as "Histories are written by the victors."



- 9 The standard linguistic convention is to put an asterisk in front of a sentence or word that is ungrammatical; that is, cannot be generated by the native speaker's grammar.
- 10 Murray (1986) takes a closer look at the need + past participle construction.
- 11 Milroy and Milroy draw a contrast between what they call Type 1 and Type 2 complaints about language. If the opposition expressed is to language change itself, they term this Type 1; Type 2 complaints are concerned with efficiency in written language. I do not adopt this distinction because I find it more important to take into consideration the conflation of written and spoken language and differing definitions of grammaticality.
- 12 The 1992 edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* points out that the word *rhetoric* has undergone a shift in usage:

The word *rhetoric* was once primarily the name of an important branch of philosophy and an art deserving of serious study. In recent years the word has come to be used chiefly in a pejorative sense to refer to inflated language and pomposity. Deprecation of the term may result from a modern linguistic puritanism, which holds that language used in legitimate persuasion should be plain and free of artifice – itself a tendentious rhetorical doctrine, though not often recognized as such. But many writers still prefer to bear in mind the traditional meanings of the word. Thus, according to the newer use of the term, the phrase empty rhetoric, as in “The politicians talk about solutions, but they usually offer only empty rhetoric,” might be construed as redundant. But in fact only 35 percent of the Usage Panel judged this example to be redundant. Presumably, it can be maintained that rhetoric can be other than empty.

The mention of *linguistic puritanism* is surprising in this context; in fact, the tone might indicate that the editors are torn: they are surprised (and perhaps not quite satisfied) with the decision of their Usage Panel (in itself an interesting phenomenon), but they also point out the fact that rhetorical rules are not objective: they are doctrines.

- 13 Available at: <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2762>.
- 14 Available at: [http://writenowisgood.typepad.com/write\\_now\\_is\\_good/wordimage\\_combo/](http://writenowisgood.typepad.com/write_now_is_good/wordimage_combo/).
- 15 This issue is so much in the minds of the public that in October 2009, the *New York Times* reissued an article entitled “Minder of Misplaced Apostrophes Scolds a Town” that originally appeared in 2001.
- 16 Benjamin Zimmer's weblog post dated April 29, 2006, at Language Log looks at this legend very closely.
- 17 This is, of course, a fairly modern development. Early writing systems of Western European languages had no regulated orthography, no dictionaries or language pundits. Take, for example, the name Shakespeare, which shows up as Shakespeare, Shakespere, Shakespear, Shackspeare, Shake-speare, Shakspeare, and Shaxberd, to name just a few variants. It's very hard to imagine anyone in the present day being so lax with spelling. John Steinbeck does not show up as John Stenpeck or Stienpack. Our orthography is so set in stone that it lags centuries behind change in the spoken language.
- 18 In this discussion I have taken a short cut which some will find questionable, in that I have not considered in any depth what is meant by literacy, a term which has been widely used and which stands at the center of much scholarly and educational debate. Here I use literate both in its narrowest way, as a reference to the skill needed to read and write, and in some of its broader connotations, as a measurement of cultural

- knowledge. The history of thought about literacy is one which I do not have time to explore here, but it is obviously both interesting and important. In particular, it would be useful to understand the point in our history in which our perceptions of the relationship of the written and spoken language began to change, as it seems that the subordination of spoken to written language may be a fairly new cultural phenomenon. I am very thankful to Deborah Keller-Cohen for valuable discussions on this topic.
- 19 While Bernstein never made explicit the connection between languages of oral cultures and “restricted” codes, or languages of literate ones and “elaborated” codes, my reading of his work is not an unusual one.
- 20 In a persuasive essay on the advantages of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor (1994) discusses examples of the kind of reasoning which ranks literate cultures as inherently more valuable than oral ones.
- 21 Earlier it was established that all living languages change; it can also be stated unequivocally that all change is preceded by variation. However, it cannot be claimed that all variation is followed by change.

### Suggested further reading

Asking a linguist how many languages they speak is like asking a doctor how many diseases they have.

(Lynnequist, <http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/>)

For those with little or no background in linguistics who would like to learn more, the following books and articles provide an introduction to a sampling of relevant topics. Note that some are more general and others more specific; some are more conversational in tone, and others more technical. Please also consult the Shortened bibliography on p. 337.

### Morphology

Aronoff, M. and Fudeman, K.A. (2010) *What Is Morphology?* Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

### Phonetics and phonology

Ashby, P. (2005) *Speech Sounds*. New York: Routledge.

Odden, D.A. (2005) *Introducing Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Syntax, grammar

Crystal, D. (2003a) Grammatical Mythology. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2003b) The Structure of Sentences. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Veit, R. (1999) *Discovering English Grammar*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

## General introductions

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. and Hyams, N.M. (2009) *An Introduction to Language*. Boston: Cengage Wadsworth.

Vanderweide, T., Rees-Miller, J. and Aronoff, M. (2001) *Study Guide for Contemporary Linguistics*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.

## Language change and language history

Aitchison, J. (2001) *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2005) *The Stories of English*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press.

## History of American English

Bailey, R.W. (2004) American English: Its Origins and History. In E. Finegan and J.R. Rickford (eds.) *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Sociolinguistics

Alim, H.S. (2009) Hip Hop Nation Language. In A. Duranti (ed.) *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Eckert, P. (2004) Adolescent Language. In E. Finegan and J.R. Rickford (eds.) *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ervin-Tripp, S., et al. (2004) "It Was Hecka Funny": Some Features of Children's Conversational Development. In *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Symposium about Language and Society*, Austin, TX, April 16–18. Available at: <http://xrl.in/726q>.

Winford, D. (2003) *An Introduction to Contact Linguistics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Wolfram, W. and Schilling-Estes, N. (2006) Social and Ethnic Dialects. In *American English: Dialects and Variation*. London: Blackwell.

## Uses and misuses of dictionaries

Nunberg, G. (2005) The Book of Samuels. November 29. Available at: <http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~nunberg/johnson.html>.