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Languages, Dialects, and Varieties

Key Concepts

The difference between a language and a dialect

Defining a standard language

Defining dialects by region: drawing geographical boundaries

Development of ethnic dialects

Varieties defined according to their forms and functions: styles, registers, and genres

We stated in the introductory chapter that all languages exhibit internal variation, that is, each language exists in a number of varieties and is in one sense the sum of those varieties. We use the term **variety** as a general term for a way of speaking; this may be something as broad as Standard English, a variety defined in terms of location and social class, such as lower-class New York City speech, or something defined by its function or where it is used, such as legalese or cocktail party talk. In the following sections, we will explore these different ways of specifying language varieties and how we define the terms ‘language’, ‘dialect’ (regional and social), ‘style’, ‘register’, and ‘genre.’

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Language or Dialect?

For many people there can be no confusion at all about what language they speak. For example, they are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean and they speak Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, respectively. In these cases, many people see language and ethnicity or nationality as virtually synonymous (Coulmas 1999). However, for many people, there is no one-to-one correlation between these categories; some people are both Chinese and American, or may identify as simply Canadian, not Korean-Canadian, regardless of what languages they speak.

Most speakers can give a name to whatever it is they speak. On occasion, some of these names may appear to be strange to those who take a scientific interest in languages, but we should remember that human naming practices often have a large 'unscientific' component to them. Census-takers in India find themselves confronted with a wide array of language names when they ask people what language or languages they speak. Names are not only ascribed by region, which is what we might expect, but sometimes also by caste, religion, village, and so on. Moreover, they can change from census to census as the political and social climate of the country changes.

Linguists use the term **vernacular** to refer to the language a person grows up with and uses in everyday life in ordinary, commonplace, social interactions. We should note that so-called vernaculars may meet with social disapproval from others who favor another variety, especially if they favor a variety heavily influenced by the written form of the language. Therefore, this term often has pejorative associations when used in public discourse.

Haugen (1966) has pointed out that **language** and **dialect** are ambiguous terms. Although ordinary people use these terms quite freely in speech, for them a dialect is almost certainly no more than a local non-prestigious (therefore powerless) variety of a 'real' language. In contrast, scholars may experience considerable difficulty in deciding whether one term should be used rather than the other in certain situations. How, then, do sociolinguists define the difference between a dialect and a language?

First, we need to look at the history of these terms. As Haugen says, the terms 'represent a simple dichotomy in a situation that is almost infinitely complex.' The word 'language' is used to refer either to a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms, and 'dialect' is used to refer to one of the norms.

A related set of terms which brings in additional criteria for distinction is the relationship between what the French call *un dialecte* and *un patois*. The former is a regional variety of a language that has an associated literary tradition, whereas the latter is a regional variety that lacks such a literary tradition. Therefore, *patois* tends to be used pejoratively; it is regarded as something less than a dialect because it lacks an associated literature. Even a language like Breton, a Celtic language still spoken in parts of Brittany, is called a *patois* because it lacks a strong literary

tradition and it is not some country's language. However, *dialecte* in French, like *Dialekt* in German, cannot be used in connection with the standard language, that is, no speaker of French considers Standard French to be a dialect of French, and in German to tell someone they speak a *Dialekt* means that they do not speak Standard German (called *Hochdeutsch* 'High German'). In contrast, it is not uncommon to find references to Standard English as being a dialect – admittedly a very important one – of English.

Haugen points out that, while speakers of English have never seriously adopted *patois* as a term to be used in the description of language, they have tried to employ both 'language' and 'dialect' in a number of conflicting senses. 'Dialect' is used both for local varieties of English, for example, Yorkshire dialect, and for various types of informal, lower-class, or rural speech. The term 'dialect' often implies nonstandard or even substandard, when such terms are applied to language, and can connote various degrees of inferiority, with that connotation of inferiority carried over to those who speak a dialect. This is part of what we call the **standard language ideology**, and we will have more to say about it below.

In the everyday use of the term, 'language' is usually used to mean both the superordinate category and the standard variety; dialects are nonstandard and subordinate to languages. Sociolinguists view this issue somewhat differently; every variety is a dialect, including the standard variety, and there is an increasing trend toward discussing discrete languages as ideologically constructed rather than linguistically real entities (Blommaert 2010, Garcia 2009; also, see chapter 4 for further discussion).

Mutual intelligibility

The commonly cited criterion used to determine if two varieties are dialects of the same language or distinct languages is that of **mutual intelligibility**: if speakers can understand each other, they are speaking dialects of the same language; if they cannot, they are speaking different languages. However, there are several problems with this criterion. First, mutual intelligibility is not an objectively determined fact (Salzman et al. 2012, 170). For example, some speakers of (standard) German can understand (standard) Dutch, while others may find it incomprehensible. Your ability to understand someone who speaks differently from you may vary according to your experience with different ways of speaking.

Second, because there are different varieties of German and Dutch, and they exist in what is called a **dialect continuum** (see discussion of this below), speakers of some varieties of German can understand varieties of Dutch better than they can understand other varieties of German! Historically, there was a continuum of dialects which included what we now call the different languages of German and Dutch. The varieties which became standardized as the languages of the Netherlands and Germany, Standard Dutch and Standard German, are no longer mutually

intelligible for many speakers. However, in the border area, speakers of the local varieties of Dutch and German still exist within a dialect continuum and remain largely intelligible to one another. People on one side of the border say they speak a variety of Dutch and those on the other side say they speak a variety of German, but linguistically these varieties are very similar. There are important sociopolitical distinctions, however. The residents of the Netherlands look to Standard Dutch for their model; they read and write Dutch, are educated in Dutch, and watch television in Dutch. Consequently, they say they use a local variety, or dialect, of Dutch in their daily lives. On the other side of the border, German replaces Dutch in all equivalent situations, and the speakers identify their language as a dialect of German. The interesting linguistic fact is that there are more similarities between the local varieties spoken on each side of the border than between the one dialect and Standard Dutch and the other dialect and Standard German, and more certainly than between that German dialect and the south German and Swiss and Austrian dialects of German. Thus, situations in which there is a dialect continuum make it apparent that the lines drawn between languages are not based on linguistic criteria.

The third problem with using mutual intelligibility as the criterion for status as a dialect or a language is that even without a dialect continuum, there are many examples of named, distinct languages that are mutually intelligible. Hindi and Urdu are considered by linguists to be the same language in its spoken form, but one in which certain differences are becoming more and more magnified for political and religious reasons in the quest to establish different national identities. Hindi is written left to right in the Devanagari script, whereas Urdu is written right to left in the Arabic–Persian script. Hindi draws on Sanskrit for its borrowings, but Urdu draws on Arabic and Persian sources. Large religious and political differences make much of small linguistic differences. The written forms of the two varieties, particularly those favored by the elites, also emphasize these differences. They have become highly symbolic of the growing differences between India and Pakistan (see King 2001 for more details on this historical development). As far as everyday use is concerned, it appears that the boundary between the spoken varieties of Hindi and Urdu is somewhat flexible and one that changes with circumstances. This is exactly what we would expect: there is considerable variety in everyday use but somewhere in the background there is an ideal that can be appealed to, proper Hindi or proper Urdu. This ideal is based on a sociopolitical ideology of the language, and on different social identifications of the speakers, not on any clear and objective linguistic difference.

Another example showing the sociopolitical division of language is the story of Serbian and Croatian. In what was once Yugoslavia, now divided by the instruments of ethnicity, language, and religion, the language was called Serbo-Croatian. During the time of President Tito it was a country that claimed to have seven neighbors, six constituent republics, five nationalities, four languages, three religions, two scripts, and one Tito. However, the two largest groups, the Serbs and the Croats, failed to agree on most things. After Tito's death, the country, slowly

at first and increasingly more rapidly later, fell into fatal divisiveness. Linguistically, Serbo-Croatian is a single South Slav language used by two groups of people, the Serbs and Croats, with somewhat different historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds. There is a third group in Bosnia, a Muslim group, who also speak Serbo-Croatian, and religious differences thus also contributed to the divisions which led to the eventual bloodshed. Finally, there is a very small Montenegrin group who also speak a variety which was incorporated into Serbo-Croatian. The Serbian and Croatian varieties of Serbo-Croatian are known as *srpski* and *srpskohrvatski*, respectively. The actual differences between them involve different preferences in vocabulary rather than differences in pronunciation or grammar. That is, Serbs and Croats often use different words for the same concepts, for example, Serbian *varos* and Croatian *grad* for 'train.' The varieties are written in different scripts (Roman for Croatian and Cyrillic for Serbian), which also reflect the different religious loyalties of Croats and Serbs (Catholic and Orthodox). As conflict grew, differences became more and more important and the country and the language split apart. Now, in Serbia, people speak Serbian just as they speak Croatian in Croatia. Serbo-Croatian no longer exists as a language of the Balkans (Pranjković 2001). Now that there is a separate Bosnia the Bosnians call their variety *bosanski* and Montenegrins call their variety *crnogorski* (Carmichael 2002, 236, Greenberg 2004). The situation became even more complicated when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. But the complications here are clearly socio-political, not linguistic.

There are other, less dramatically politically charged examples of how mutually intelligible varieties are considered different languages. We have already mentioned German and Dutch; we can also add the situation in Scandinavia as further evidence. Danish, Norwegian (actually two varieties), and Swedish are recognized as different languages, yet it is common for speakers of these languages to each speak their own language to each other and still be able to communicate (Doetjes 2007, Gooskens 2006, Schüppert and Gooskens 2010). Linguistic overlap between these three languages is clearly enough to make communication feasible for most speakers – in other words, they are more similar to each other than some dialects of German are to each other – but the social and political boundaries foster the continued distinction of these varieties as separate languages.

The fourth reason that mutual intelligibility cannot be used as the sole means of distinguishing dialect versus language status is that there are sometimes unintelligible dialects which are identified by their speakers as being the same language. You may be aware of varieties of English you cannot understand, for instance. A particularly interesting instance of unintelligibility of dialects occurs with what we call Chinese, which is generally accepted to include two main sub-categories of varieties, Cantonese and Mandarin. Although they share a writing system, Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible in spoken discourse; written characters are pronounced differently in these varieties although they maintain the same meaning. Yet speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese consider themselves speakers of different

dialects of the same language, for to the Chinese a shared writing system and a strong tradition of political, social, and cultural unity form essential parts of their definition of language (Kurpaska 2010).

Likewise, speakers of different regional varieties of Arabic often cannot understand one another's dialects, but are all oriented toward common standard forms (Modern Standard Arabic, with its basis in Classical Arabic). Although some native speakers of some varieties of Arabic might not understand a radio broadcast in Modern Standard Arabic (Kaye 2001), no one questions the categorization of these disparate dialects as one language, because of the religious, social, historical, and political ties between the cultures in which they are spoken.

The role of social identity

Sociolinguists claim that the defining factor in determining whether two varieties are considered distinct languages or dialects of the same language is sociopolitical identity, not linguistic similarity or difference. Orientation toward a particular standard language and, often, an associated national identity, is what makes speakers identify as speakers of language X or Y.

In direct contrast to the above situation, we can observe that the loyalty of a group of people need not necessarily be determined by the language they speak. Although Alsatian, the dialect of German spoken in the Alsace (France), is now in decline, for many generations the majority of the people in Alsace spoke their German tongue in the home and local community. However, their loyalty was and is unquestionably toward France; speaking a Germanic dialect did not mean they identified with Germany. They look to France not Germany for national leadership and they use French, not German, as the language of mobility and higher education. However, everyday use of Alsatian has been a strong marker of local identity, and for a long time was an important part of being Alsatian in France (Vassberg 1993).

The various relationships among languages and dialects discussed above can be used to show how the concepts of **power** and **solidarity** help us understand what is happening. Power requires some kind of asymmetrical relationship between entities: one has more of something that is important, for example, status, money, influence, and so on, than the other or others. A language has more power than any of its dialects. The standard is the most powerful dialect but it has become so because of non-linguistic factors. 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy' is a well-known observation. Standard English and Parisian French are good examples. Solidarity, on the other hand, is a feeling of equality that people have with one another. They have a common interest around which they will bond. A feeling of solidarity can lead people to preserve a local dialect or an endangered language in order to resist power, or to insist on independence. It accounts for the persistence of local dialects, the modernization of Hebrew, and the separation of Serbo-Croatian into Serbian and Croatian.

Part of having power is having the ability to impose your way of speaking on others as a, or the, prestigious dialect, that is, a standard language. The process through which a standard language arises is primarily a sociopolitical process rather than a linguistic one; this is the topic of the next section of this chapter.

Exploration 2.1: Naming Varieties

How do you usually describe the different languages/dialects that you speak? Did reading the section on language versus dialect make you think about the varieties you master any differently? Provide an outline of your linguistic repertoire, including information about the commonly used names for the language(s) you speak, any information about the specific variety(ies) of the language(s) you are more comfortable in, if you consider yourself a 'native speaker' of the language(s), how you learned your language(s), and what assumptions you think others might make about you based on the way you speak. Compare impressions with others in the class.

Standardization

One of the defining characteristics mentioned above about the distinction between 'dialect' and 'language' has to do with standardization. If you see yourself as a speaker of German, you orient to Standard German, not Standard Dutch, even if Standard Dutch might be linguistically more similar to your native dialect. Thus the process of standardization and the ideology involved in the recognition of a standard are key aspects of how we tend to think of language and languages in general. People tend to think of a language as a legitimate and fixed system which can be objectively described and regard dialects as deviations from this norm. This is the standard language ideology but, as we will see, it is only one way that we can think about a language and its varieties.

Standardization refers to the process by which a language has been codified in some way. That process usually involves the development of such things as grammars, spelling books, and dictionaries, and possibly a literature (see chapter 14 for further discussion of language planning processes). We can often associate specific items or events with standardization, for example, Wycliffe's and Luther's translations of the Bible into English and German, respectively, Caxton's establishment of printing in England, and Dr Johnson's dictionary of English published in 1755. Standardization requires that a measure of agreement be achieved about what is in the language and what is not.

The standard as an abstraction

It is a mistake to think of a standard language as a clearly demarcated variety which can be objectively determined. Lippi-Green (2012) writes about 'the standard language myth,' citing Crowley's (2003) work on the standard as an 'idealized language.' One of the points Lippi-Green makes is that most people (i.e., non-linguists) feel strongly that they know what the standard language is 'much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn, or describe a being from *Star Trek*'s planet Vulcan, or tell us who King Arthur was and why he needed a Round Table' (Lippi-Green 2012: 57).

Lippi-Green also states that we see the standard as a uniform way of speaking; although some regional variation might be allowed (see below for further discussion), social variation is not considered acceptable within anything labeled as the standard. Furthermore, once we have such a codification of the language we tend to see standardization as almost inevitable, the result of some process come to fruition, one that has also reached a fixed end point. Change, therefore, should be resisted since it can only undo what has been done so laboriously. The standard variety is also often regarded as the natural, proper, and fitting language of those who use – or should use – it. It is part of their heritage and identity, something to be protected, possibly even revered. Milroy (2001, 537) characterizes the resulting ideology as follows: 'The canonical form of the language is a precious inheritance that has been built up over the generations, not by the millions of native speakers, but by a select few who have lavished loving care upon it, polishing, refining, and enriching it until it has become a fine instrument of expression (often these are thought to be literary figures, such as Shakespeare). This is a view held by people in many walks of life, including plumbers, politicians and professors of literature. It is believed that if the canonical variety is not universally supported and protected, the language will inevitably decline and decay.'

This association with the standard as simultaneously the goal of all speakers and something which is created by (and accessible to) only the educated elite is also noted by Lippi-Green. She further points out that what is meant by 'educated' is never specified; indeed, it is quite circular since the standard is spoken by educated people, and we consider them educated because they speak the standard.

The connection to education goes in both directions, because once a language is standardized it is the variety that is taught to both native and non-native speakers of the language. It takes on ideological dimensions – social, cultural, and sometimes political – beyond the purely linguistic ones. In Fairclough's words (2001, 47) it becomes 'part of a much wider process of economic, political and cultural unification ... of great ... importance in the establishment of nationhood, and the nation-state is the favoured form of capitalism.' According to the criteria of association with a nation and its economic, political, and cultural capital, both English and French are quite obviously standardized, Italian somewhat less so, and varieties associated with sub-groups within a society, such as the variety known as African American English, not at all.

Exploration 2.2: Standard Pronunciation?

How do you pronounce the following words? (They are presented in groups to bring out particular contrasts that are present in some dialects but not others; try to pronounce these words naturally, but do note if you are aware of pronunciations different from your own.) Do you consider some pronunciations nonstandard? Compare your assessments with others in the class; does what is considered 'standard' vary from one region to the next?

but, butter, rudder

bad, bed, bid

pen, pin

cot, caught, court

happy, house, hotel, hospital

tune, lute, loot

suet, soot

calm, farm

which, witch

Mary, merry, marry

do, dew, due

news, noose

picture, pitcher

morning, mourning

The standardization process

In order for a standard form to develop, a norm must be accepted; as discussed above, that norm is an idealized norm, one that users of the language are asked to aspire to rather than one that actually accords with their observed behavior. However, it is perceived as a clearly defined variety.

Selection of the norm may prove difficult because choosing one vernacular as a norm means favoring those who speak that variety. As noted by Heller (2010), language can be viewed not as simply a reflection of social order but as something which helps establish social hierarchies. Thus it is not just that a variety is chosen as the model for the standard because it is associated with a prestigious social identity, but that it also enhances the powerful position of those who speak it, while diminishing all other varieties, their speakers, and any possible competing norms.

Because the standard is an abstraction, attitudes toward and associations with the normative forms are all-important. A group that feels intense solidarity may be willing to overcome great linguistic differences in establishing a norm, whereas one that does not have this feeling may be unable to overcome relatively small differences and be unable to agree on a single variety and norm. Serbs and Croats were never able to agree on a norm, particularly as other differences reinforced linguistic ones. In contrast, we can see how Hindi and Urdu have gone their separate ways in terms of codification due to religious and political differences.

The standardization process itself performs a variety of functions (Mathiot and Garvin 1975). It unifies individuals and groups within a larger community while at

the same time separating the community that results from other communities. Therefore, it can be employed to reflect and symbolize some kind of identity: regional, social, ethnic, or religious. A standardized variety can also be used to give prestige to speakers, marking off those who employ it from those who do not, that is, those who continue to speak a nonstandard variety. It can therefore serve as a kind of goal for those who have somewhat different norms; Standard English and Standard French are such goals for many whose norms are dialects of these languages. However, as we will see (particularly in chapters 6–8), these goals are not always pursued and may even be resisted.

The standard and language change

Standardization is also an ongoing matter, for only ‘dead’ languages like Latin and Classical Greek do not continue to change and develop. The standardization process is necessarily an ongoing one for living languages. The standardization process is also obviously one that attempts either to reduce or to eliminate diversity and variety. However, it would appear that such diversity and variety are ‘natural’ to all languages, assuring them of their vitality and enabling them to change (see chapter 8). To that extent, standardization imposes a strain on languages or, if not on the languages themselves, on those who take on the task of standardization. That may be one of the reasons why various national academies have had so many difficulties in their work: they are essentially in a no-win situation, always trying to ‘fix’ the consequences of changes that they cannot prevent, and continually being compelled to issue new pronouncements on linguistic matters. Unfortunately, those who think you can standardize and ‘fix’ a language for all time are often quite influential in terms of popular attitudes about language. One issue today is the influence of texting and computer-mediated communication on the language, and there are always those who are resistant to new developments. Take, for instance, an article in the online version of the *Daily Mail* titled ‘I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language,’ in which the author writes about ‘... the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Message Service) vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.’ Such attitudes about languages are not in keeping with how sociolinguists view language; as we have discussed above, internal variation is inherent to all languages, and all languages keep changing.

Standard English?

It is not at all easy for us to define Standard English because of a failure to agree about the norm or norms that should apply. For example, Trudgill (1995, 5–6) defines Standard English as the variety:

- Usually used in print
- Normally taught in schools
- Learned by non-native speakers
- Spoken by educated people
- Used in news broadcasts

Note that this definition revolves around how it is used, not the particular features of the language, as Standard English is constantly changing and developing. Trudgill also points out that the standard is not the same as formal language, as the standard can also be used colloquially (see below for a discussion of formal and informal styles).

Historically, the standard variety of English is based on the dialect of English that developed after the Norman Conquest resulted in the permanent removal of the Court from Winchester to London. This dialect became the one preferred by the educated, and it was developed and promoted as a model, or norm, for wider and wider segments of society. It was also the norm (although not the only variety) that was carried overseas, but not one unaffected by such export. Today, written Standard English is codified to the extent that the grammar and vocabulary of written varieties of English are much the same everywhere in the world: variation among local standards is really quite minor, so that the Singapore, South African, and Irish standard varieties are really very little different from one another so far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned. Indeed, Standard English is so powerful that it exerts a tremendous pressure on all such local varieties; we will return to this topic in chapter 14 in our discussion of language planning and policy. However, differences in the spoken varieties exist and are found everywhere in the world that English is used and, while these differences may have been reduced somewhat in the British Isles, they may actually have increased almost everywhere else, for example, within new English-speaking countries in Africa and Asia.

The standard–dialect hierarchy

As we have just seen, trying to decide whether something is or is not a language or in what ways languages are alike and different can be quite troublesome. However, we usually experience fewer problems of the same kind with regard to dialects. There is usually little controversy over the fact that they are either regional or social varieties of something that is widely acknowledged to be a language. That is, dialects are usually easily related to the standard variety because of the latter's sociopolitical salience.

Some people are also aware that the standard variety of any language is actually only the preferred dialect of that language: Parisian French, Florentine Italian, or the Zanzibar variety of Swahili in Tanzania. It is the variety that has been chosen for some reason, perhaps political, social, religious, or economic, or some

combination of reasons, to serve as either the model or the norm for other varieties. It is the empowered variety. As a result, the standard is often not called a dialect at all, but is regarded as the language itself. It takes on an ideological dimension and becomes the 'right' and 'proper' language of the group of people, the very expression of their being. One consequence is that all other varieties become related to that standard and are regarded as dialects of that standard but with none of its power. Of course, this process usually involves a complete restructuring of the historical facts.

We see a good instance of this process in Modern English. The new standard is based on the dialect of the area surrounding London, which was just one of several dialects of Old English, and not the most important since both the western and northern dialects were once at least equally as important. However, in the modern period, having provided the base for Standard English, this dialect exerts a strong influence over all the other dialects of England so that it is not just first among equals but rather represents the modern language itself to the extent that the varieties spoken in the west and north are generally regarded as its local variants. Historically, these varieties arise from different sources, but now they are viewed only in relation to the standardized variety.

A final comment seems called for with regard to the terms language and dialect. A dialect is a subordinate variety of a language, so that we can say that Texas English and Swiss German are, respectively, dialects of English and German. The language name (i.e., English or German) is the superordinate term. We can also say of some languages that they contain more than one dialect; for example, English, French, and Italian are spoken in various dialects. If a language is spoken by so few people, or so uniformly, that it has only one variety, we might be tempted to say that language and dialect become synonymous in such a case. However, another view is that it is inappropriate to use dialect in such a situation because the requirement of subordination is not met. Consequently, calling something a dialect of a particular language implies that that language has at least two dialects, but calling something a language does not necessarily entail that it has subordinate dialects.

Regional Dialects

Regional variation in the way a language is spoken is likely to provide one of the easiest ways of observing variety in language. As you travel throughout a wide geographical area in which a language is spoken, and particularly if that language has been spoken in that area for many hundreds of years, you are almost certain to notice differences in pronunciation, in the choices and forms of words, and in syntax. There may even be very distinctive local colorings in the language which you notice as you move from one location to another. Such distinctive varieties are usually called **regional dialects** of the language.

Dialect continua

This use of the term dialect to differentiate among regional varieties can be confounded by what is called a **dialect continuum**, in which there is gradual change of the language. Over large distances the dialects at each end of the continuum may well be mutually unintelligible, although speakers can easily understand people in neighboring areas. In these cases, it was (and still is) possible to travel long distances and, by making only small changes in speech from location to location, continue to communicate with the inhabitants. (You might have to travel somewhat slowly, however, because of the necessary learning that would be involved!) It has been said that at one time a person could travel from the south of what is now Italy to the north of what is now France in this manner. It is quite clear that such a person began the journey speaking one language and ended it speaking something entirely different; however, there was no one point at which the changeover occurred, nor is there actually any way of determining how many intermediate dialect areas that person passed through. For an intriguing empirical test of this idea, one using recent phonetic data from a continuum of Saxon and Franconian dialects in the Netherlands, see Heeringa and Nerbonne (2001). They conclude that the traveler ‘perceives phonological distance indirectly’ (2001, 398) and that there are ‘unsharp borders between dialect areas’ (2001, 399).

In such a distribution, which dialects can be classified together under one language, and how many such languages are there? As we have suggested above, this distinction is based more on social identity and political boundaries than on linguistic criteria. The hardening of political boundaries in the modern world as a result of the growth of states, particularly nation-states rather than multinational or multiethnic states, has led to the hardening of language boundaries. Although residents of territories on both sides of the Dutch–German border (within the West Germanic continuum) or the French–Italian border (within the West Romance continuum) have many similarities in speech even today, they will almost certainly tell you that they speak dialects of Dutch or German in the one case and French or Italian in the other. Various pressures – political, social, cultural, and educational – may serve to harden state boundaries and to make the linguistic differences among states more, not less, pronounced.

Dialect geography

When a language is recognized as being spoken in different varieties, the issue becomes one of deciding how many varieties and how to classify each variety. **Dialect geography** is the term used to describe attempts made to map the distributions of various linguistic features so as to show their geographical provenance. For example, in seeking to determine features of the dialects of English and to show their

distributions, dialect geographers try to find answers to questions such as the following. Is this an *r*-pronouncing area of English, as in words like *car* and *cart*, or is it not? What past tense form of *drink* do speakers prefer? What names do people give to particular objects in the environment, for example, *elevator* or *lift*, *carousel* or *round-about*? We call such features **variables**, as there are variable (i.e., varied and changing) ways of realizing them. For example, the past tense of *drink* might be *drank* or *drunk*, or the words for the fuel you put in an automobile could be *petrol* or *gas*.

Sometimes maps are drawn to show actual boundaries around such variables, boundaries called **isoglosses**, so as to distinguish an area in which a certain feature is found from areas in which it is absent. When several such isoglosses coincide, the result is sometimes called a **dialect boundary**. Then we may be tempted to say that speakers on one side of that boundary speak one dialect and speakers on the other side speak a different dialect. We will return to this topic in chapter 6.

Everyone has an accent

Finally, the term **dialect**, particularly when it is used in reference to regional variation, should not be confused with the term **accent**. Standard English, for example, is spoken in a variety of accents, often with clear regional and social associations: there are accents associated with North America, Singapore, India, Liverpool (Scouse), Tyneside (Geordie), Boston, New York, and so on. However, many people who live in such places show a remarkable uniformity to one another in their grammar and vocabulary because they speak Standard English and the differences are merely those of accent, that is, how they pronounce what they say.

One English accent has achieved a certain eminence, the accent known as **Received Pronunciation** (RP), the accent of perhaps as few as 3 percent of those who live in England. (The 'received' in Received Pronunciation is a little bit of old-fashioned snobbery: it meant the accent allowed one to be received into the 'better' parts of society!) This accent is of fairly recent origin (see Mugglestone 1995), becoming established as prestigious only in the late nineteenth century and not even given its current label until the 1920s. In the United Kingdom at least, it is 'usually associated with a higher social or educational background, with the BBC and the professions, and [is] most commonly taught to students learning English as a foreign language' (Wakelin 1977, 5). Those who use this accent are often regarded as speaking 'unaccented' English because it lacks a regional association within England. As Hughes et al. (2005, 3) say: 'Because of its use on radio and television, within Britain RP has become probably the most widely understood of all accents. This in turn means that the learner who succeeds in speaking it, other things being equal, has the best chance of being understood wherever he or she goes in the British Isles.' Other names for this accent are the Queen's English, Oxford English, and BBC English. However, there is no unanimous agreement that the Queen does in fact use RP. Harrington et al. (2000) point out that an acoustic analysis of her Christmas broadcasts since 1952 showed a drift in her accent 'toward one that is characteristic

of speakers who are younger and/or lower in the social hierarchy.' She 'no longer speaks the Queen's English of the 1950s.' Today, too, a wide variety of accents can be found at Oxford University, and regional accents also feature prominently in the various BBC services.

Trudgill (1995, 7) has pointed out what he considers to be the most interesting characteristics of RP: the speakers who use it do not identify as coming from a particular region, nor is the variety associated with a particular region, except that it is largely confined to England. Further, it is possible to speak Standard English but not speak RP; hence our characterization of it as an accent and not a dialect. As Bauer (1994, 115–21) also shows, RP continues to change. One of its most recent manifestations has been labeled 'Estuary English' (Rosewarne 1994) – sometimes also called 'Cockneyfied RP' – a development of RP along the lower reaches of the Thames reflecting a power shift in London toward the worlds of finance, entertainment, sport, and commerce and away from that of inherited position, the Church, law, and traditional bureaucracies.

It is also interesting to observe that the 1997 *English Pronouncing Dictionary* published by Cambridge University Press abandoned the label RP in favor of BBC English even though this latter term is not unproblematic, as the BBC itself has enlarged the accent pool from which it draws its newsreaders. One consequence of this policy is that some people see old standards as being eroded, that is, their own power base being threatened. A letter writer to the *Daily Telegraph* in October 1995 informed readers that 'Sir Harold Nicolson looked forward, in 1955, to an age when all classes would "speak English as beautifully and uniformly as they do upon the BBC." Forty years on, though, the Corporation has abandoned its old manner of speech in favour of the all-too-aptly named "classless" accent, which, though certainly uniform, is far from beautiful.'

The development of Estuary English is one part of a general leveling of accents within the British Isles. The changes are well documented; see, for example, Foulkes and Docherty (1999), who review a variety of factors involved in the changes that are occurring in cities. One feature of Estuary English, the use of a **glottal stop** for a 't' sound (Fabricus 2002), is also not unique to that variety but is spreading widely, for example, to Newcastle, Cardiff, and Glasgow, and even as far north as rural Aberdeenshire in northeast Scotland (Marshall 2003). Watt (2000, 2002) used the vowels in *face* and *goat* to show that Geordie, the Newcastle accent, levels toward a regional accent norm rather than toward a national one, almost certainly revealing a preference for establishing a regional identity rather than either a very limited local identity or a wider national one. Recent research (see Coupland 2007, 97–9) also shows that while British people in general still have a high regard for RP they also like Scottish- and Irish-accented English. However, they do not like the accents of cities such as Glasgow, Birmingham, and Liverpool, nor do they like Asian- or German-accented English. Most people like their own accents whatever they are and seem content with them. Coupland says of accent variation: the 'social meanings ... are clearly multidimensional, inherently variable, and potentially unstable' (2007, 99).

The most generalized accent in North America is sometimes referred to as **News-caster English**, the accent associated with announcers on the major television networks, or **General American**, a term which emphasizes its widespread acceptance and lack of regional association (see the website for this chapter to find a link to the discussion of Standard American English in the *Do You Speak American?* PBS production). Lippi-Green (2012, 62) endorses the use of the term SAE (**Standard American English**), while recognizing that it is a 'mythical' beast and idealizes a homogeneous variety. There is no official definition of what forms are included in SAE in terms of accent or grammar; as noted by Pinker (2012), 'The rules of standard English are not legislated by a tribunal but emerge as an implicit consensus within a virtual community of writers, readers, and editors. That consensus can change over time in a process as unplanned and uncontrollable as the vagaries of fashion.' It is also often recognized that there are regional standards in US English; for example, while **r-lessness** may be considered standard in Boston or Atlanta, it is not in Chicago; **/ai/ monophthongization** (e.g., the pronunciation of the vowel in the pronoun 'I' to sound more like 'Ah') is heard by newscasters in southeastern parts of the United States but not farther north or west.

As a final observation we must reiterate that it is impossible to speak English (or any other language) without an accent. There is no such thing as 'unaccented English.' RP is an accent, a social one rather than a regional one. However, we must note that there are different evaluations of the different accents, evaluations arising from social factors not linguistic ones. Matsuda (1991, 1361) says it is really an issue of power: 'When ... parties are in a relationship of domination and subordination we tend to say that the dominant is normal, and the subordinate is different from normal. And so it is with accent. ... People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent.' In the pages that follow we will return constantly to linguistic issues having to do with power.

Social Dialects

The term dialect can also be used to describe differences in speech associated with various social groups or classes. An immediate problem is that of defining **social group** (see chapter 3) or **social class** (see chapter 6), giving proper weight to the various factors that can be used to determine social position, for example, occupation, place of residence, education, income, 'new' versus 'old' money, racial or ethnic category, cultural background, caste, religion, and so on. Such factors as these do appear to be related fairly directly to how people speak. There is a British 'public-school' dialect, and there is an 'African American' dialect found in many places in the United States; we will elaborate on **ethnic dialects** in the next section.

Whereas regional dialects are geographically based, social dialects originate among social groups and are related to a variety of factors, the principal ones

apparently being social class, religion, and race/ethnicity. In India, for example, caste, one of the clearest of all social differentiators, quite often determines which variety of a language a speaker uses. In a city like Baghdad in a more peaceful era than at present the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim inhabitants spoke different varieties of Arabic. In this case the first two groups used their variety solely within the group but the Muslim variety served as a *lingua franca*, or common language, among the groups. Consequently, Christians and Jews who dealt with Muslims used two varieties: their own at home and the Muslim variety for trade and in all inter-group relationships.

Studies in **social dialectology**, the term used to refer to this branch of linguistic study, examine how ways of speaking are linked to social differences within a particular region. Socio-economic class is a main factor which will be addressed at length in chapters 6–8. Another factor in social dialectology which has received a great deal of attention is race/ethnicity; we will focus on African American Vernacular English, about which a wealth of sociolinguistic research has been carried out, and also present information about Latino Englishes in the United States, which are emerging as an important focus in the study of ethnic dialects. First, however, we will introduce a German social dialect which is controversial both in German society and among sociolinguists, a case which brings to the forefront the concerns inherent to social dialectology.

Kiezdeutsch ‘neighborhood German’

The term *Dialekt*, ‘dialect’ in German, as mentioned above, has historically been used solely to refer to regional varieties. While sometimes stigmatized, these dialects are at the same time integral to regional identities and seen as deeply, essentially German. While a body of literature on *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* (‘guest worker German’) emerged beginning in the 1970s, this variety was identified as a second language or a ‘pidginized’ variety of German, and very clearly spoken by immigrants (e.g., Keim 1978, Pfaff 1980), and thus, not a German *Dialekt*. Subsequently, a body of research about multilingual language practices of multiethnic groups of urban youths in Germany showed that multilingual practices were common among urban youths of many backgrounds (e.g., Auer and Dirim 2003, Kallmeyer and Keim 2003); while this research did show that such practices were not unique to children of immigrant background, it also did not suggest that multilingual discourse was something quintessentially German. However, when *Kiezdeutsch*, a way of speaking associated with multiethnic neighborhoods, was described as a German dialect (Wiese 2010, 2012), resistance to the idea of recognizing this way of speaking as a variety of the German language became apparent. The controversies surround this work, both in academic circles and in public discourses, exemplify the issues in social dialects in general. These issues include the label applied to the variety, identifying the features of the variety, correlations with demographic factors, and the process of the development.