

In Authority in Language,
James I. Lesley Milroy,
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Prescription and standardisation

1.1 Language prescription and its consequences

In this book we attempt to look dispassionately at *prescription* in language and the effects of prescriptive attitudes on the daily lives of individuals. Prescription depends on an ideology (or set of beliefs) concerning language which requires that in language use, as in other matters, things shall be done in the 'right' way. We can, perhaps, best understand what it is by comparing language with other aspects of human behaviour, such as dress or table manners. If, in a particular culture at a particular time, guests at a dinner are required to wear evening dress (of a particular form) and required to use their knives and forks in a particular way, these requirements are *prescriptive*, that is, they are imposed from 'above' by 'society', not by *ad hoc* agreement amongst the guests themselves. They are also *arbitrary*: in North America, for example, the fork is transferred to the right hand for eating, whereas in Britain, the fork remains in the left hand and the knife in the right. One could actually think of a variety of perfectly efficient ways – besides these – in which a meal could be eaten; yet, in these cultures, the slightest deviation from the prescribed norms is immediately noticed and considered to be 'bad manners'.

Language is a much more complex phenomenon than table manners: it is also a much more central aspect of human experience. Whereas table manners are codified in handbooks of etiquette, 'correct' use of language is codified in handbooks of usage. It is probable that all speakers of English (and probably most speakers of many other languages) have a number of definite opinions as to what is 'correct' or 'incorrect' in the language they use. They may often look to 'expert' opinion, rather than to their own knowledge of the language, to decide. Particular English usages, such as

double negatives, as in *He never said nothing*, are viewed as unacceptable although they are very widely used; some varieties of a language (e.g. BBC spoken English) are publicly considered to be 'better' than some other varieties (e.g. Birmingham urban dialect). Indeed, some languages are thought to be in some senses 'better' than others: it has often been claimed for example that French is more logical than English.

Language, as we have suggested, is a much more complex phenomenon than such things as table manners, and it is difficult to separate the nature of language prescription (i.e. imposition of norms of usage by authority) from a number of related phenomena, such as *normalisation* and *standardisation* of language. In this first chapter, we shall attempt to address these difficulties; in particular we shall relate prescriptive attitudes very largely to standardisation of language. However, we must first briefly consider some of the consequences of prescriptive and authoritarian attitudes to language behaviour for the daily lives of individuals. These consequences are more wide-ranging than has usually been acknowledged, and it is part of our purpose in this book to indicate how deeply these attitudes affect us and how widespread their consequences are.

Some of the narrower consequences of language prescription are really quite well known, although they are usually accepted by the public as quite reasonable and are not questioned. A person who speaks English perfectly effectively, but who has occasional usages that are said to be 'substandard' (e.g. omitting initial [h] in words like *happy*, *hair*, or using double negatives) may well find that his/her social mobility is blocked and may, for example, be refused access to certain types of employment without any official admission that the refusals depend partly or wholly on his use of language. This point is quite clearly understood by the writer of the following (a Victorian English language scholar), who spoke of [h] dropping as a 'revolting habit', and added:

Those whom we call 'self-made men' are much given to this hideous barbarism. . . . Few things will the English youth find in after-life more profitable than the right use of the aforesaid letter. (Oliphant, 1873:226)

These are strong words; yet many readers may believe that it is quite right that people should be refused employment on the grounds of 'wrong' pronunciation or grammar *alone*, possibly

justifying this opinion by arguing that these faults are signs of 'carelessness', which reflect on the general character of the individual. They may not, however, be aware that a majority of their fellow-citizens are accustomed to commit 'faults' (such as [h]-dropping), and that they are, therefore, condemning a very large proportion of the population. Furthermore, those who do use so-called 'unacceptable' grammar and pronunciation generally belong to the lower social groups; therefore, such attitudes to language can be interpreted as a kind of social-class discrimination, and it may be that political power favouring certain élite groups is exercised in part through these shibboleths. Although public discrimination on the grounds of race, religion and social class is not now publicly acceptable, it appears that discrimination on linguistic grounds *is* publicly acceptable, even though linguistic differences may themselves be associated with ethnic, religious and class differences (see further J. R. Edwards, 1979; Hudson, 1980). These attitudes to the use of grammar and pronunciation are, in any case, highly interesting in themselves and will be further discussed below.

As a result of the development of sociolinguistic research in recent years, it has become possible to address a number of practical problems in social and educational matters that can be affected by prescriptive attitudes to language. Two of these are particularly discussed in this book. The first arises from the fact that many 'advanced' countries, including Britain, now have much larger non-indigenous populations than they had in the first half of the century. Britain is now a multi-cultural and a multi-lingual society (for some details and a discussion, see Linguistic Minorities Project 1985), and a large number of different mother-tongues are used in Britain. The necessity for the major language (English) to be accessible to non-indigenous groups is not the only consequence arising.

Sociolinguistic research has, amongst other things, tried to identify the cultural and social disadvantages that are encountered by these groups in acquiring and using the majority language. But there have also been important researches into the difficulties encountered by members of minority groups in public and social transactions (which always involve the use of language). These difficulties, it has become clear, are not confined to mastering the vocabulary, grammar and segmental phonology (pronunciation of vowels and consonants) of English. They may, for instance, affect intonation of utterances; if it happens that the intonation of polite

questions in the mother-tongue is similar to that of commands in English, the non-native speaker may be thought to be behaving rudely when he uses that intonation. In a broader sense, it has been shown that there are different cultural norms of politeness and different expectations as to language use in different speech events and transactions, e.g. in employment interviews (Furnborough *et al.*, 1982). Sometimes, because of these different cultural expectations, the non-native interviewee may be thought to be over-respectful and ingratiating; at other times he may appear to be sullen and awkward because the norms of his own culture require that he should not appear over-confident and 'pushy' in such situations. This can result in a poor opinion of the interviewee on the part of the interview board, and a sense of grievance (leading to accusations of racial discrimination) on the part of the candidate. To the extent that cultural norms (intermingled as they are in these cases with linguistic norms) are prescriptive, these matters can be embraced in a sociolinguistic view of the ideology of language prescription (see Chapter 6 for further discussion).

A second extended area in which the prescriptive ideology is important is language testing and assessment. Standardised tests that are intended to estimate children's linguistic abilities are used in the educational systems of many countries, including Britain and the United States. Standardised testing procedures are also widely used to assess degrees of language handicap in people (often children) who have speech impairments. This is not an unimportant matter. It was estimated by Quirk (1972) that about 4 per cent of a population is likely to suffer from language handicap: this means that the number of speech-impaired people in Britain is probably over 2 million.

Language testing and assessment, as we shall demonstrate in Chapter 7, are often based on rather simplistic notions of the nature of language and its use. The tests frequently do not take account of variation according to dialect and occasion of use. In addition, they often do not allow for the application of conversational rules such as ellipsis. Thus, if a child is shown a picture of a horse jumping over a fence and asked what the horse is doing, he may be penalised for replying: *Jumping over a fence* rather than *The horse is jumping over a fence*, despite the fact he is applying a normal conversation rule of ellipsis. He may then be given a lower score, which might not greatly distinguish him in this case from a child at an earlier stage of speech development who answers *Horse*

jump fence. In such cases, it seems that the test procedure is confusing literary or written norms (which are resistant to ellipsis) with spoken norms (see further, Chapters 3, 4 and 8 below).

We have argued that prescriptive attitudes have far-reaching consequences including the two already mentioned, and these consequences are explored in some detail in later chapters. But, in the remainder of this chapter, we are concerned more broadly with the nature of language prescription and its relation to the process of language standardisation. In Section 2 we go on to discuss the attitudes of professional language scholars to prescription and compare these (in Section 3) with public and popular attitudes. In the final section we attempt a fuller account of the nature of language standardisation.

1.2 Linguistics and prescription

The existence of prescriptive attitudes is well known to linguistic scholars, but in 'mainstream' linguistics of recent times scholars have generally claimed that prescription is not a central part of their discipline and even that it is irrelevant to linguistics. It has not been fully studied as an important sociolinguistic phenomenon. All standard introductory textbooks in linguistics affirm that linguistics is a descriptive discipline and not a prescriptive one:

First, and most important, linguistics is *descriptive*, not prescriptive. A linguist is interested in what *is* said, not what he thinks *ought* to be said. He describes language in all its aspects, but does not prescribe rules of 'correctness'. (Aitchison, 1978:13)

Similarly, handbooks compiled by linguistic scholars make the same reservations. Daniel Jones has this to say in the introduction to his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1955): 'No attempt is made to decide how people *ought* to pronounce; all that the dictionary aims at doing is to give a faithful record of the manner in which certain people do pronounce.'

Although it is necessary to insist on the priority of description, it does not follow from this that prescription should never be studied at any point. However, the reservation about prescription that is commonly expressed has, in practice, led to a general tendency to study language *as if* prescriptive phenomena play no part in language. Many professional language scholars appear to

feel that, whereas it is respectable to write formal grammars, it is not quite respectable to study prescription.

The attitudes of linguists (professional scholars of language) have little or no effect on the general public, who continue to look to dictionaries, grammars and handbooks as authorities on 'correct' usage. If, for example, lexicographers (dictionary-makers) attempt to remove all traces of value-judgment from their work and refuse to label particular usages (such as *ain't*) as 'colloquial' and others as 'slang', there is likely to be a public outcry. This was notoriously the case when *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* appeared in the USA in 1961 (see the discussion by Sledd, 1962). Its failure to provide such evaluations of usage was described by one critic as 'a scandal and a disaster': behind such attitudes one can sense the view that since the language is believed to be always on a downhill path, it is up to experts (such as dictionary-makers) to arrest and reverse the decline. It is not necessary to dwell at length on these widely shared attitudes. Readers will have seen letters to the newspapers complaining about particular usages, and we shall comment later on the 'complaint tradition' in English.

Modern linguistic scholars, however, have always had good reason to assert that their discipline is fundamentally descriptive and not prescriptive. During this century, their assertions have been motivated by a desire to study language in all its forms as objectively as possible. If we want to know more about language as a phenomenon and the universal human capacity to use it, then we must try to base our discipline on observed fact (as far as possible) and certainly not on a set of prejudices. After all (so the argument runs), it would be absurd for a physical scientist to refuse to study some molecule because he felt it was more 'sloppy' or 'careless' than some other molecule or for a zoologist to classify animals in terms of their 'ugliness' or 'friendliness' rather than their membership of genera, etc.; it is equally absurd for the linguist to rule out study of some particular aspect of language use because he has some negative attitude to it. In this view of linguistics, the idea of linguistics as a 'science' obviously looms very large.

The view that linguistics is a science (bound up as it is with anti-prescriptive and anti-evaluative notions) has been prominent for a much longer time than is generally acknowledged; it was quite clearly stated in the nineteenth century. In 1861, the first volume of Max Müller's *Lectures on the Science of Language* appeared. In the

first chapter, Müller stated that linguistics was a *physical* science. In this, he was affected by current nineteenth-century notions of the nature of science: he meant that linguistics was analogous to biology and geology and differentiated from 'humanities' such as history, literature and law (1861:22). Müller went on to make the usual assertion that all forms of language are equal as far as the 'scientist' is concerned:

In the science of languages... language itself becomes the sole object of scientific inquiry. Dialects which have never produced any literature at all... are as important, nay for the solution of some of our problems, more important, than the poetry of Homer, or the prose of Cicero. (1861:23)

Before this time, Richard Chenevix Trench (1851) (who later became an archbishop) had proclaimed that language had its own 'life', independent of man, and had attacked those who attempted to control the development of language by 'arbitrary decrees' (Trench, 1888:223-4). These nineteenth-century scholars were themselves reacting against the authoritarian linguistics of the eighteenth century, which we discuss later in this volume. For nineteenth-century scholars, linguistics had become primarily a historical or evolutionary discipline. It was clearly necessary for them to give attention to obscure and antique varieties of a 'non-standard' kind if they were to explain the complicated processes of change that had given rise to modern languages like French, English and German, and which continued to affect these languages.

Although these respectable Victorians were already reacting strongly against the prescriptive attitudes of the eighteenth century, the most extreme anti-prescriptive statements, as far as we know, are those made by some members of the 'American structuralist' school of linguistics. Bloomfield (1933:22) felt that discovering why *ain't* is considered bad and *am not* good is not a fundamental question in linguistics, and he thought it strange that 'people without linguistic training' should devote 'a great deal of effort to futile discussions of this topic'. Bloomfield was certainly implying that the study of prescriptivism was of little or no interest to linguistics; he was thereby limiting the field of linguistics to a descriptive study of form and system in language which takes little or no account of language as a *social* phenomenon. Bloomfield's influence has been immense, and some of his followers have attacked 'unscientific' approaches to language with missionary zeal. C. C.

Fries (1957) seems to have equated traditional school grammar with prescription (which was by definition 'bad' and 'unscientific' in the view of structural linguists of the time), and in his book on English syntax he went so far as to even reject traditional linguistic terms such as 'noun', 'verb' and 'adjective'. Fries's work was directed towards the educational system; that of Robert A. Hall, Jr. was directed at the ordinary consumer. Anxious to assure all his readers that their use of language was just as good as that of anyone else, he proclaimed that 'there is no such thing as good or bad, correct or incorrect, grammatical or ungrammatical, in language' (1950).

Although linguistic scholars would now dispute Hall's statement (especially the part about 'grammatical or ungrammatical'), they have continued (for the most part) to assert or assume that their discipline is descriptive and theoretical and that they do not deal in prescription. In Western Europe and America most theoretical linguists would still affirm that all forms of language are in principle equal. As Hudson (1980:191) has recently put it:

Linguists would claim that if they were simply shown the grammars of two different varieties, one with high and the other with low prestige, they could not tell which was which, any more than they could predict the skin colour of those who speak the two varieties.

Although some evidence from work by social psychologists (Giles *et al.*, 1974, 1975) lends some support to Hudson's point, we do not, in fact, know whether *standard* languages can be conclusively shown to have *no* purely linguistic characteristics that differentiate them from non-standard forms of language (the matter has not really been investigated). It appears to be an article of faith at the moment that judgments evaluating differences between standard and non-standard varieties are always socially conditioned and never purely linguistic. However, we shall later suggest that the process of language standardisation involves *the suppression of optional variability in language* and that, as a consequence, non-standard varieties can be observed to permit more variability than standard ones (e.g. in pronunciations of particular words). Thus, there may be one sense at least in which the *linguistic* characteristics of non-standard varieties differ from those of 'standards'.

However this may be, we shall see in Chapter 4 that non-standard forms are not simply debased variants of standards and that they can be shown to be 'grammatical' in their own terms.

Historically, standard languages have been superimposed on dialects. If a linguistic scholar is to do his work adequately (to give a clear description of a language, to explain how children acquire language, to explain how languages change in the course of time), he would be extremely foolish to allow his own prejudices and notions of correctness to get between him and his data. But the professional linguist's insistence on 'objectivity' and 'scientific inquiry' appears to have been generally misunderstood. This may arise partly from scholarly neglect (until recently) of the *social* functions of language. Although it is understandable that linguists should have to place clear limitations on their field of inquiry (especially if they are to make progress in *formal* linguistics, following Chomsky (1965) etc.), we are unlikely to make great progress in understanding the nature of language if we entirely ignore its *social* functions and characteristics. Amongst these are phenomena such as language standardisation, the nature of literacy, notions of prestige in language and popular attitudes to usage.

In the following sections, we shall go on to consider such matters. But first we should like to point out that misunderstanding of linguists' attacks on prescription may have had dire consequences in some quarters. Since the 1950s there has been a decline in the teaching of 'grammar' in schools. Some educationalists appear to have interpreted attacks on *prescriptive* grammar as attacks on the teaching of grammar in general; and as university language teachers, we have become aware that some students now enter universities to study English or modern languages with a rather hazy idea of basic grammatical terminology (such as *subject*, *transitive*, *preposition*). Some commentators have even claimed that there has been a decline in general literacy as a result of this trend. We see no reason to accept this latter point, as it is a relative question that cannot be adequately tested. However, experts in linguistics have sometimes been blamed for the decline in grammar teaching (and the supposed decline in literacy).

Recently Honey (1983) has asserted that English language teaching has been in decline, and has gone on to blame the discipline of linguistics for this decline. No reason is given for the connection that Honey makes between literacy standards and the influence of general linguists (such as Chomsky), and the author does not make the necessary distinction between language *system* and language *use* (on which see Section 3).

The quotations from linguists that Honey gives (largely to the effect that 'all languages are equal') refer to language *system* and not to the *use* of language in social context. In fact, many linguistic scholars have been at the forefront of those who have wished to maintain good educational standards (Stubbs and Hillier, 1983; Sinclair, 1982) and they have made *positive* recommendations for improved language work in schools.

The authors of elementary books on linguistics, however, have usually been anxious to dissociate their account of the subject from that of traditional handbooks of correctness. As we have seen (cf Aitchison, above) they usually dismiss prescription routinely, and assert that linguistics is *descriptive*. Their general point – that, if one is to study the nature of language objectively, one cannot make prior value-judgments – is frequently misunderstood, and it has sometimes called forth splenetic and misinformed denunciations of linguistics as a whole. One example amongst many is Simon (1980).

In an essay entitled 'The Corruption of English' (1980), Simon blames structural linguistics and literary structuralists for an alleged decline in language use and for permissive attitudes to language: 'What this is, masquerading under the euphemism "descriptive linguistics", . . . is a benighted and despicable catering to mass ignorance under the supposed aegis of democracy.' His essay is outspoken and full of emotive language ('pseudoscientific mumbo jumbo', 'rock-bottom illiteracy', 'barbarians', 'vandalism', etc.), and it betrays ignorance of what linguistics is about. To Simon, linguists are almost equated with some menace that is threatening Western (i.e. American) civilisation from outside. It is unfortunate that misunderstandings and misapplications of the American structural linguists' teaching should have made it seem reasonable for anyone to write in this ignorant way.

As many people still interpret descriptive linguistics as inimical to standards of usage, there has clearly been some failure of communication between linguistic scholars and the general public (especially when we consider that scholars have been insisting on objective description for so long – since the time of Trench and Müller). One reason for this is that 'mainstream' linguistics (especially in the USA) has concentrated more on the abstract and formal properties of language than on language in its social context. Bloomfield (1933), as we saw above, considered that prescription was irrelevant to linguistics as a 'science'. Yet some linguists (relatively few) have been directly interested in prescription. Haas

(1982), for example, has been able to state that prescription 'is an integral part of the life of language'. By refusing to be interested in prescription, he adds: 'linguists only ensure that every enterprise of linguistic planning will be dominated by ignorant enthusiasts and incompetent pedants' (Haas, 1982:3).

The development of sociolinguistics in recent years has awakened a greater interest (than used to be fashionable) in text-based linguistics, standardisation of language and the general nature of variation and change in language. When we view language as fundamentally a social phenomenon, we cannot then ignore prescription and its consequences. The study of linguistic authoritarianism is an important part of linguistics, and as linguists we feel an obligation to attempt to close the gap between specialist and non-specialist views on the nature and use of language. One reason for this is that attitudes to language have practical consequences, for example in education, law, business and speech therapy. But the best reason for studying prescription is simply that it is interesting in itself.

1.3 Attitudes to language

As we saw in the last section, the attitudes to language expressed by many people are *prescriptive*, whereas scholars usually take the view that linguistics is a *descriptive* 'science' which has no place for value-judgments. In this section, we explore this difference a little further, but, in addition, we should like to suggest that public attitudes as they are openly expressed may not always be identical with the views that people hold privately. Bolinger (1980:1–10) has had much to say about what he calls linguistic *shamanism*: he has noted that certain writers set themselves up as public guardians of usage, commenting on supposed mis-use of language and on supposed linguistic decline. These statements by guardians appear frequently in the press; general 'popular' attitudes (i.e. privately held attitudes of ordinary people), however, may not be quite so easily accessible for reasons we shall discuss. In what follows, we shall first explore further the differences between the approach of linguistics and the public judgments of non-linguists, and then pass on to point out certain difficulties in reconciling these public views with the actual speech behaviour of ordinary speakers.

Modern linguistics, following de Saussure (1915), is based on the

doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, and progress in the subject would have been very difficult without this doctrine. As de Saussure perceived, the linguistic forms that conventionally stand for things in the real world do not ultimately bear a necessary and inherent relationship to those referents. Thus, the sound sequence in the English word *dog* bears no inherent relationship to the canine quadruped it refers to: it is merely conventional to use this item in English to refer to the animal. Even echoic or onomatopoeic words differ in different languages, e.g. *cock-a-doodle-doo*, *kikiriki*. It would be foolish to argue that an English usage such as *dog* is somehow a 'better' or 'worse' way of referring to the canine than equivalents in other languages, such as *chien* or *Hund*. Similarly, it would be foolish to argue that *in general* the grammatical structure of one language is 'superior' to that of another. The word-order of English (in which the subject precedes the verb) is not superior to that of Gaelic (in which the verb comes first): it is merely different, and neither word-order is directly conditioned by relationship to 'the real world'. In short, if one wishes to produce accurate descriptions, one cannot reasonably start by making value-judgments about the formal grammatical, lexical and phonological structures of different languages or dialects (e.g. by rejecting or ignoring some features that are pre-judged as not 'acceptable' to some analyst or other). One consequence of the doctrine of arbitrariness is the linguist's working assumption that no language or dialect can be shown to be better or worse than another *on linguistic grounds alone*.

Ordinary people (i.e. non-linguists), however, have been accustomed from time immemorial to make value judgments about language. Words have even been considered to have magical properties or have been subject to tabu. Certain words referring, for example, to the deity, illness, sex, death, may be forbidden, and in some societies a man is not allowed to use his mother-in-law's name. Certain words associated with bodily functions are avoided in most circumstances and replaced by euphemisms such as *wee-wee* or, in formal circumstances, by technical terms such as *faeces*, *vagina*. The histories of languages are full of rapid vocabulary changes motivated by the avoidance of tabu, as the euphemisms themselves take on the 'unpleasant' associations of the words they replace. All this may seem to be very illogical, but it is part of the life of language. The ordinary user of language does not, apparently, agree with Shakespeare's common-sense observation: 'that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet', and

he may also feel that the words of his language have inherent associations with the things they stand for. As the farm-hand observed while he watched the pigs wallowing in the mire 'Rightly be they called pigs on account of their disgusting habits'.

Apart from beliefs in magic, tabu and the 'power of words', there are other firmly held opinions about language that do not accept the linguist's doctrine of arbitrariness. Many of these have to do with social stratification and cultural conditioning. Some dialects of a language are considered more 'beautiful' than others; some languages are widely held to be more 'logical' than others. We shall later consider these attitudes and their consequences in greater detail. For the moment, let us accept that although the formal structures of languages and dialects are not appropriate phenomena for value-judgments, speakers of languages *do* attach values to particular words, grammatical structures and speech-sounds. There is apparently a yawning gap between what linguists profess to think about language and what ordinary people assume in their daily use and observation of language.

We have referred above to the 'formal structures' of languages, implying a distinction between this 'formal structure' and the actual use of language on particular occasions. A distinction of this kind has been basic in the work of most general linguists since de Saussure proposed a distinction between *langue* (approximately 'language system') and *parole* (approximately 'language use'). A similar distinction was proposed by Chomsky (1965) as *competence* (the underlying rules of language that native speakers know) and *performance* (actual 'use'). It is important to grasp that *langue*, *competence* or 'language system' are relatively abstract: in practice, many of the most influential thinkers in linguistics have been concerned with this abstract 'language system'. They have been more interested in trying to explain the universal human ability to acquire language and master its complexities than in value-judgments about particular usages: it is not surprising that disputes about *ain't* and *between you and I* have seemed trivial to them, when they have been preoccupied with the fact that the general structure of all languages and dialects is so astonishingly complex. Public statements about language, however, always refer directly to language in use: they almost never show explicit understanding of the distinction between *system* and *use* and seldom acknowledge another important fact about language, viz., that it is in a continuous state of change.

Occasionally, however, guardians do make claims based on

actual *usage* that nevertheless contain implicit claims about the superiority of one language *system* over another. An article by Boyd and Boyd (1980) has suggested that varieties of English that distinguish between *shall* and *will* have an advantage over those that have only *will* in so far as they have an additional resource that can give added subtlety and precision. Interesting as such arguments are, it is our view that they are misleading. All languages and dialects will, when compared with others, appear to have 'gaps' in the system at some point. For example, English does not have a reflexive possessive pronoun. We do not say:

*Sam is in himself's office.

If we use an anaphoric pronoun (one that refers back to an antecedent), we must say:

Sam is in his office.

This is ambiguous when out of context, as *his office* could be 'Sam's office' or some other male person's office. In other languages, the system may have an additional resource and may require a choice at this point between reflexive and non-reflexive. Thus, in Danish:

Sam er i *sit* kontor

means – unambiguously – 'Sam is in Sam's office', whereas

Sam er i *hans* kontor

means that Sam is in someone else's office. It is pointless to argue that English *ought* to have a possessive reflexive pronoun like Danish *sin, sit*; it is, in fact, quite easy to use other resources of the language system to disambiguate when necessary. We can say either *Sam is in his own office* or *Sam is in Bill's office*. The gap in the system, therefore, is not necessarily a problem in the actual use of the language.

Indeed, the argument that *shall/will* dialects of English (generally regarded as standard varieties) have the advantage over *will* dialects (generally non-standard) can easily be matched by arguments that non-standard dialects have other similar advantages over the standard. For example, the *language system* of Standard English has no grammatical resource for differentiating between singular and plural in the second person pronoun (*you*). Some dialects, however, have a categorical distinction between *you*

(singular) and *yous* (plural). In such dialects (e.g. Northern Irish), a comment like *I'll see you tomorrow* will be understood to be directed to only one person in a given group: *I'll see yous tomorrow* will, however, be preferred when two or more persons in the company are addressed. This appears to be a useful resource in these non-standard dialects (even though the standard speaker can disambiguate when necessary by saying 'all of you' or something of the sort). But it is noticeable that guardians of the language do not generally recommend the 'superior' systems of non-standard dialects: they confine their claims about superiority to aspects of *standard* English grammar (such as the *shall/will* distinction). It can be suggested therefore, that their real concerns are not wholly linguistic but largely social: they are in some way promoting the interests of the variety most widely considered to have prestige.

At the level of *language system*, arguments that one language or dialect is linguistically superior to another are generally very difficult to sustain. The number and complexity of grammatical rules in any language or dialect cannot be easily shown to be significantly more or less than in some other language or dialect, and greater number and complexity of rules would not in any case prove superiority. General linguists, therefore, believe that it is pointless to argue in these terms. Considerations of *superiority* or *inferiority*, *beauty* or *ugliness* and *logicality* or *illogicality* in usage are held to be irrelevant at the level of *language system*, although they may be relevant at the level of use.

If claims about the superiority of one language to another are not amenable to rigorous proof, then neither can we prove that one language is *equal* to another. In a scientific academic context, this latter proposition is best viewed as a statement of the *null hypothesis*. But neither this claim nor the claim about superiority is in fact capable of satisfactory verification or falsification: the two claims are simply two sides of the same coin, and as they are popularly conceived and debated, they are ideological, rather than scientific, statements.

Those who argue about linguistic superiority may however sometimes point out that some languages appear to spread at the expense of others and to survive as others die out. English in Britain, for example, has spread at the expense of Celtic languages, and in Australia, aboriginal languages are threatened by English. Is this not a sign that English is a superior language? Again, there is no way of demonstrating that, at the level of language system,

English is indeed a superior language. The grammatical systems of these other languages are at least equally subtle and complex. The spread of English is due, not to its superiority as a system of language, but to the greater economic and political success of its speakers in recent centuries. In a similar way, Classical Latin became the official language of a great empire; yet, its great prestige did not ensure its ultimate survival in the face of political and economic change.

Language guardians do not usually make explicit reference to the distinction between *language system* and *language use*. Their comments usually focus on certain particular points of usage (e.g. the *shall/will* distinction or the double negative). Thus they appear to be comments about language use rather than system. Yet these comments often have implications for language system, as appeals for preferring one usage over another are often based on some limited aspect of language system (e.g. analogy with other grammatical constructions in the language). To demonstrate the kind of argumentation that is used, we shall discuss the prescription in favour of *different from* as against *different to* – a prescription that seems to have originated in the eighteenth century, but which is still found in handbooks of correctness (e.g. Metcalfe, 1975).

In this construction the choice of *from* or *to* is *arbitrary* in the sense that the selection of one or the other makes no difference to the meaning of the construction. Clearly, in other circumstances, the choice of *from* or *to* is not arbitrary, but meaningful, as in *John ran to the house* as against *John ran from the house*. The directional particles in these sentences have *contrastive* meanings. In *different from* and *different to*, however, the particles *from* and *to* seem in effect to have lost their usual meanings and to have become empty connectors: the construction has the same meaning regardless of whether *from* or *to* is used (see Hurford and Heasley, 1983:50 for a discussion of ‘meaningless’ and ‘meaningful’ prepositions).

Various arguments can be used to justify the choice of one construction as against the other. In favour of *different from*, we can argue on the analogy of the verb *differ*, which requires the particle *from* and not *to*: we say *chalk differs from cheese* and not **chalk differs to cheese*. On the other hand, *different to* might be justified on the grounds that it falls into a set of words with comparative meanings such as *similar*, *equal*, *superior*, etc.: these require *to*, as in *similar to*, *equal to*. Furthermore, the eighteenth century could well have argued for *different to* by appealing to Latin grammar (as

they commonly did in other circumstances): in Latin the verb ‘to differ’ takes the *dative* case after it, and this is translated into English as *to* or *for*. A third variant, *different than* (which is particularly common in Scotland, Ireland and North America), can also be justified on the analogy of certain comparative uses in English, such as *other than*, or even *better than*, *worse than*. Thus, there are three choices, all of which can be justified by some argument; yet the prescriptive tradition generally recommends that only one of these is ‘correct’ and should be selected in preference to the others.

In this discussion we have not been attempting to suggest that the handbook prescriptions should be overthrown and one of the ‘disallowed’ usages elevated to a position of correctness. We should merely like to emphasise two things. First, language guardians usually feel a strong compulsion to select one, and only one, from a set of equivalent usages and recommend that as the ‘correct’ form. Second, their choice of a preferred form is often arbitrary – in linguistic terms: the other variants are quite serviceable. Arguments that are advanced in support of the preferred form can usually be matched by equally good arguments in support of the rejected forms. But all these arguments are *post hoc* rationalisations, and do not in themselves prove anything. It is likely that eighteenth-century preference for *different from* rested, not on any real superiority in terms of logic, effectiveness, elegance or anything else, but on the observed usage of the ‘best people’ at that time. The choice of that particular form was probably *socially* motivated, and the general compulsion to select one form out of a set of equivalents was a consequence of the trend towards standardisation, a characteristic of which is the *suppression of optional variability* (see 1.4, below).

Apart from analogical arguments and arguments based on Latin grammar (e.g. ‘never use a preposition at the end of a sentence’), language guardians have also used arguments based on *logic* or *mathematics* and on *etymology*. Thus, a mathematical argument (‘two negatives make a positive’) was used in the eighteenth century to condemn the double negative (as in *I never said nothing*), and etymological arguments are still very commonly used in matters of vocabulary. For example, it is held to be wrong to use *aggravating* in the sense ‘annoying’ as its Latin etymon means ‘making heavier’ (or ‘more serious’).

In Chapter 2 we go on to relate these publicly held views of correctness to the tradition of linguistic complaint in English and the

place of the complaint tradition in the rise of Standard English. We now return to the difficult question of distinguishing between publicly expressed and privately held attitudes to social variation in language.

There is clearly a difficulty in relating publicly expressed attitudes to the views that ordinary people have of their own usage. First, so-called unacceptable usage and low-status varieties of language certainly persist despite being publicly stigmatised (Ryan, 1979). Presumably they could not persist if the relevant speakers felt strongly enough that they 'ought' to learn and use forms of higher prestige (on this see Chapter 3.1). Second, it seems to be virtually impossible to rely on speakers' reports of their own usage or of their attitudes to usage, so that we cannot easily find out what people actually think. Linguists and social psychologists who have investigated popular attitudes have found that people's overt claims about language are inaccurate and often contradict their own actual usage. As Labov (1972a:214) points out, speakers often err in the direction of standard usages when they respond to field-workers' questions about their own usage: they do not reliably report on what they use themselves. Labov (1966) also found that speakers with the 'broadest' pronunciations showed the greatest tendency to downgrade others for the same pronunciations. Sociolinguistic research has additionally shown that speakers certainly have *knowledge* of different variants (Glasgow speakers, for example, *know* that the medial consonant of the word *butter* alternates between [t] and the glottal stop); furthermore, they do not necessarily use the same variant 100 per cent of the time. Thus, if a speaker is observed to use *done* for *did* (as in *I done it*), it is quite likely that he also uses the *did* form some of the time. The fact that speakers have knowledge of variants and also knowledge of the social values attached to them means that speaker reports tend to indicate social stereotypes rather than personal or community values. They tend to report the form they consider to be socially accepted rather than the form they use themselves.

Some sociolinguists (Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1974) have made use of 'Speaker-Report Tests' in order to estimate the reliability of speakers' claims about their own usage. Some speakers make what appear to be dishonest reports by claiming to use standard variants that they never actually use. In one study (O'Kane, 1977; J. Milroy, 1981), a number of working-class speakers in Belfast were given three different pronunciations of each of a series of common words

like *hand*, *bag*, *stop*. The first pronunciation in each case was RP ('Received Pronunciation' – the 'Oxford' or 'BBC' accent), the second was 'general Belfast' and the third 'broad Belfast'. They were asked to say which one they used themselves. Several female respondents – all of them strongly non-standard speakers – claimed that they used the RP variant when it was plain that they *never* did. It appears that these speakers interpreted the task as a test of their knowledge of the 'correct' pronunciation and responded accordingly: they did not want to be thought ignorant.

These instances raise rather clearly the general problem of identifying popular attitudes. It seems that people are willing to pay lip-service to correctness and prestige variants, but at the same time they continue to speak the variety current in their own speech communities. In fact, statistical counts of variants actually used are probably the best way of assessing attitudes. Despite the views of the guardians, most people do not put into effect *absolute* views that particular usages are 'right' or 'wrong'. The work of Labov (1966) and others has, repeatedly, demonstrated that people feel some variants (e.g. [h]-less variants) to be appropriate in some 'styles' and other variants (e.g. [h]-ful ones) appropriate in other styles and contextual situations (for further discussion of this, see Chapter 5).

A major task of sociolinguistics is to explain why linguistic differences that are essentially arbitrary are assigned social values. Another associated task is to explain why people continue to use non-standard varieties when they claim publicly to agree that only the 'standard' is 'correct'. What is the function of prescriptive attitudes and what effects do they have?

This mismatch between actual usage and what people publicly claim to think constitutes one of the many paradoxes in sociolinguistics. But it is certainly clear that in the wider community there is some agreement that certain usages (phonological, grammatical and lexical) are stigmatised, whereas others carry prestige.

The histories of languages appear to contain many instances of contradictory and changing attitudes to the same arbitrary linguistic phenomenon. It is reasonable to ask why a characteristic like [h]-dropping has not always been stigmatised in all languages and dialects when it is so strongly stigmatised in present-day British English and dialects. In the Romance languages, for example, [h]-dropping cannot possibly have been stigmatised by all speakers in all communities at all times: if it had, these languages would have

retained Latin [h], but they have universally lost it. Obviously, it would be foolish to accuse a French speaker of careless speech because he fails to pronounce the *h* in *homme* 'when it is there in the spelling'. The loss of [h] in Romance languages is a completed linguistic change which must at certain times have been favoured by influential social groups and so must have carried high prestige.

Even in English, it is unlikely that [h]-dropping was a matter of public stigma much before 1800 (Wyld, 1927:211–12, 219), and there are some signs that it may even have been socially favoured in earlier centuries. There are many thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts that show considerable evidence of [h]-loss, and Elizabethan puns often depend on [h]-loss (e.g. puns on *air/hair/heir* in Marlowe, *Dido and Aeneas* and Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*). Public stigma could hardly have been significant in those centuries if [h]-dropping could appear in literary texts. There is, therefore, a strong possibility that public attitudes to [h]-dropping have been reversed. It seems that a usage favoured at one time can become stigmatised at another (on the history of [h]-dropping, see J. Milroy, 1983).

A very clear case of reversal in social evaluation is the case of the post-vocalic [r] in New York City. Before the Second World War, non-rhotic British accents and those of the American East Coast had high status, and loss of post-vocalic [r] in words like *car*, *card*, *butter* seems to have extended throughout the social class continuum in New York City. Labov's work demonstrates that by 1966 the loss of post-vocalic [r] had, on the contrary, become a marker of casual style and lower social status, with formal styles and higher status favouring rhotic forms. Thus it appears that in the USA prestige forms are rhotic, whereas in England they are non-rhotic. Clearly, these varying attitudes are social: in linguistic terms, [h]-ful and [r]-ful accents are neither better nor worse than [h]-less and [r]-less ones. The matter is arbitrary from the linguistic point of view.

These phonological examples concern public evaluations of different resources of language systems. In England, dialects that lack a systematic contrast between words with initial /h/ and words with initial vowels (e.g. *hair* v. *air*) are accorded low status, whereas dialects that lack a contrast between words with and without post-vocalic /r/ (e.g. *court* v. *caught*) have high status. In grammatical usage also it can be pointed out that the 'acceptability' or otherwise of particular variants is socially motivated and linguistically

arbitrary. To use *what* as a relative pronoun, as in *the house what I saw*, is neither more nor less efficient in terms of language system than to use SE *the house that I saw* or *the house which I saw* (see discussion in 3.4, 3.5). It is simply that some dialects use the item *what* as part of their relative pronoun system, while others (including SE) do not. In the next section and in subsequent chapters, we shall approach the question of arbitrary choices of this kind in terms of the ideology of standardisation.

Some readers may still feel that some types of usage can truly be shown to be better or worse than others – more logical, precise and effective perhaps, or less ambiguous or less vague. As we shall see, this is often correct at the level of *usage*. To evaluate usage as against *system*, however, depends on making a number of careful distinctions, of which the main one is the distinction between speech and writing. Prescriptive judgments and stigmatisation of particular forms have not normally made the necessary distinctions between *system* and *use*, or between speech and writing. Our major task here has been to point out that public statements condemning aspects of differing language systems do not make these distinctions clearly. Furthermore, they do not appear to have as much effect on ordinary speakers of non-standard English as one might expect. In the course of history, usages that were once publicly favoured have become stigmatised and usages that were stigmatised have become favoured. Indeed, it often happens that a particular usage is not attacked as non-standard until it has become very general and widespread. Margaret Thatcher was recently (1982) attacked for using the word *prevaricate* in the sense 'stall, play for time' when it should 'properly' mean 'tell lies'. In so doing, she used the word in the sense that most people now use it: the Latin etymology has been virtually lost (as it has been in thousands of other words), and the guardians in this case (as in many others) are locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. Linguistic change has overtaken them.

It is appropriate, therefore, to ask what is the function of the public guardians of usage if, in many cases of prescription of grammar, phonology and word-choice, their detailed recommendations go largely unheeded. In what follows, we shall make some distinctions that will go some way towards answering the question. Fundamentally, their role is related to the ideology of *standardisation*, in that they attempt to keep the notion of a standard language alive in the public mind. They are also, in many cases, genuinely and

properly concerned with clarity and effectiveness in communication, but their prescriptions focus much more on public and written styles than on speech. Their recommendations may often be sensible in terms of written usage and well intended; but we shall see that a general failure to consider *spoken language* as against written language can have unfortunate consequences.

In Section 1.4 we pass on to a discussion of the nature of language standardisation (the consequences of which reflect strongly on the public and popular attitudes that we have discussed). In Chapter 2 we proceed to outline the history of standardisation of English and discuss some of the processes through which the notion of a standard language is maintained.

1.4 Language standardisation

For a number of reasons it is difficult to point to a fixed and invariant kind of English that can properly be called the standard language, unless we consider only the *written* form to be relevant. It is only in the spelling system that full standardisation really has been achieved, as deviations from the norm (however logical) are not tolerated there. When, however, we refer to 'standard' spoken English, we have to admit that a good deal of variety is tolerated in practice, and scholars have often had to loosen their definition of a 'standard' in dealing with speech. Thus it becomes possible for them to say that a standard form of English, which they believe to be largely uniform in its grammar and vocabulary, is nevertheless *spoken* in a variety of different *accents* (Quirk, 1968), or to speak of 'varieties of Standard English' (Trudgill and Hannah, 1982; cf. also Wyld's idea (1936) of a 'Modified Standard'). Strictly speaking, however, standardisation does not tolerate variability. Thus it is best, in our view, to look at the question of 'Standard English' in a different light, and to speak of standardisation as a historical process which – to a greater or lesser degree – is always in progress in those languages that undergo it. Standardisation is motivated in the first place by various social, political and commercial needs and is promoted in various ways, including the use of the writing system, which is relatively easily standardised; but absolute standardisation of a spoken language is never achieved (the only fully standardised language is a dead language). Therefore it seems appropriate to speak more abstractly of standardisation as an

ideology, and a standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent.

If we consider standardisation in matters outside language, the notion applies rather obviously to other media of exchange, such as money, or weights and measures. Thus the coinage is strictly standardised so that there can be *no* variation in the values assigned to the counters in the system, and the aim of this standardisation is to ensure reliability and hence confidence. Language is also a medium of exchange, albeit a very much more complex medium than coinage, and the aim of language standardisation is the same. This was clear to the eighteenth-century writers on 'ascertainment': Swift (1712) was partly concerned with *improving* the language, but he preferred that the language (even if it was imperfect) should be standardised in a permanent form rather than it should be allowed to change continuously. Thus standardisation aims to ensure fixed values for the counters in a system. In language, this means preventing variability in spelling and pronunciation by selecting fixed conventions uniquely regarded as 'correct', establishing 'correct' meanings of words (*aggravate*, for example, means – according to the standard ideology – 'make more serious', not 'annoy': the second 'colloquial' meaning is disallowed), uniquely acceptable word-forms (*he does* is acceptable, but *he do* is not) and fixed conventions of sentence structure. The whole notion of standardisation is bound up with the aim of functional efficiency of the language. Ultimately, the desideratum is that everyone should use and understand the language in the same way with the minimum of misunderstanding and the maximum of efficiency.

This aim is wholly understandable, and many would argue that if the forms of a language were not validated and legitimised in some way by some authority or authorities, the language would break up into dialects that would sooner or later become mutually incomprehensible. This is what happened to late Latin after the collapse of the Roman Empire. As the central authority vanished, so the language fragmented into dialects which developed into the various Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, Friulian, Romansh and others). The ideology of standardisation requires not only that the English in the British Isles should be as uniform as possible, but also that it should be uniform in other places throughout the world where English has been implanted. Thus this ideology affects not only North America

and Australasia, but also the English of, for example, Singapore (which has, in fact, diverged considerably from British English) and the Caribbean (for a discussion of Singapore English see Chapter 5).

In the strict sense in which we have so far used the term *standardisation*, no spoken language can ever be fully standardised. If we return to Saussure's famous analogy of the game of chess and use the analogy in a different way, we can compare language use to a game of chess in which different people may occasionally play the game by different rules. In chess, it would clearly be inconvenient and irritating if one player moved his pawns diagonally instead of vertically, and even more inconvenient if, in the course of time, one player unilaterally and silently changed his own rules of play in some particular ways. This is what does happen in language use. Different people and different communities play to some extent by different rules and the rules change (silently) in the course of time. As a result of this, miscommunications can occur.

Cross-dialectal miscomprehension and miscommunication have not been investigated to any extent, and text-books are often content to state that Standard English is the variety most accessible to the majority of people and leave it at that. While it is clear that active use of spoken English varies considerably, our own researches (J. Milroy, 1978 and 1981; L. Milroy, 1984), also lead us to believe that passive *comprehension* of Standard English is by no means as uniform or absolute as it might appear. Conversely, as Labov (1972c) has demonstrated, the accessibility of non-standard forms to Standard English speakers is even less certain. Speakers of one variety (whether it is called the standard or not) do not necessarily have intuitions about all aspects of the grammar of other varieties, and so there are constructions that they do not immediately understand.

Some examples of cross-dialectal miscomprehension in syntax have already been discussed in print (J. Milroy, 1978; L. Milroy, 1984; J. Harris, 1982). They can easily be added to, and we shall enumerate some relevant non-standard usages in Chapter 4. For the moment, we again notice as an example the categorical distinction between the singular and plural 2nd person pronoun (see above p. 14), which is found mainly in Scottish and Irish varieties of English.

The following quotation is from tape-recordings made during fieldwork in Belfast:

So I said to our Trish and our Sandra: 'Yous wash the dishes'. I might as well have said: 'You wash the dishes', for our Trish just got up and put her coat on and went out.

Not only does this speaker demonstrate that she has in her pronoun system a categorical distinction here between *you* and *yous*, she also assumes (wrongly) that the fieldworker has the same distinction. There were many cases both in the fieldwork and in daily life where miscomprehension was evident. Often, when a group of people was addressed as *you* (SE plural), individuals would look round to see which single member of the group was being addressed. Instances such as this may seem small in themselves, but the problem is that we cannot know how often such miscomprehensions go *unrepaired*. *Yous*-dialect users might be rather offended by a person who leaves a conversational group with the comment *I'll see you tomorrow*, each of them believing that he has addressed a certain member of the group and deliberately snubbed the others.

There is also a (possibly apocryphal) story about a Yorkshire car-driver who was run over by a train because he interpreted the word *while* to mean 'until' (as it does in Yorkshire) at a level crossing where the sign said 'Wait while the red light flashes'. Such disastrous consequences are no doubt rare; yet miscomprehensions that arise from cross-dialectal differences can certainly lead to bafflement and even resentment. It is important to recognise that they occur, and also necessary to recognise that those most likely to suffer as a result are non-standard speakers. People are assumed to have full passive competence in the standard, but standard speakers do not normally learn the differing rules of non-standard varieties. Moreover, such difficulties occur not only in ordinary conversational contact, but also in formal contexts such as classrooms, where a middle-class teacher's unfamiliarity with the vernacular usage of a pupil could also lead to misunderstanding and unnecessary difficulty (see Trudgill, 1975:48 for an example).

One reason why possible cross-dialectal miscomprehensions have not been much investigated is that non-standard norms of usage have usually been ignored, or considered careless and ignorant deviations from 'grammar' when they have been noticed. Language guardians always consider non-standard usage (and sometimes standard colloquialisms) to arise from the perversity of speakers or from cognitive deficiency (an inability to learn what is 'correct'). In

addition, at least one influential branch of linguistics has tended to discourage systematic observation of actual usage. In the 1960s, Chomsky argued against 'corpus-based' linguistics. As a result, much of the grammatical theorising of the 1960s and 1970s was based on the middle-class Standard English of the scholars themselves (for a critique of this see Labov, 1972b:292). It was further assumed that differences between dialects were probably only superficial (we shall see in Chapter 4 that there are at least some dialectal differences that are very deep-rooted). It seems to us that those who proposed and accepted these theories may themselves have been influenced by the ideology of standardisation, which inclines us all to view a language as a relatively fixed, invariant and unchanging entity. Far from advocating the teaching of non-standard dialects in schools (as Honey, 1983, apparently believes), the Chomskyan tradition has been implicitly pro-standard and possibly even prescriptive in some of its effects.

Although we have referred loosely to 'Standard English', there is – in the very strict sense in which we have so far used the term 'standardisation' – no such entity as a standard spoken language; even so-called 'Standard English' can be perceived to incorporate variability and change. On the phonological level, for instance, the 'Received Pronunciation' of Standard English appears to permit some variation, e.g. between 'long' and 'short' /u/ and /ʊ/ (as in RP *food* and *foot*) in forms like *room* and *toothbrush*. Examples from all levels of language can easily be multiplied. Standardisation, as Swift perceived, prevents or inhibits change and variation, and the ideology of standardisation is inimical to change and variation. Therefore, a label like 'Standard English' is a rather loose and pre-scientific label. What Standard English actually is thought to be depends on acceptance (mainly by the most influential people) of a common core of linguistic conventions, and a good deal of fuzziness remains around the edges. The ideology of standardisation, whatever merits there may be in it, tends to blind us to the somewhat ill-defined nature of a standard language, and may have some undesirable consequences in that it leads to over-simplified views of the nature of language, evidently held even by highly educated speakers.

The term *standardisation*, which we have defined strictly, has been used by certain scholars (e.g. Haugen, 1972) in a somewhat looser sense. Its chief characteristic, according to our account, is intolerance of optional variability in language. In the view of

others, this perception is allied to a number of other stages of 'standardisation' that appear to have been involved in the histories of languages (on which see 2.1 for an account of the development of Standard English). According to these scholars, a standard language is one which has minimal variation of form and maximal variation of function (Leith, 1983:32). Such a definition is a suitably relative one, but it is clear that the various stages that are usually involved in the development of a standard language may be described as the consequence of a need for uniformity that is felt by influential portions of society at a given time. A variety is then *selected* as a standard (competing varieties might no doubt be selected by different parts of the community, yet only one of them might become the standard in the long run); this variety is now *accepted* by influential people, and then *diffused* geographically and socially by various means (official papers, the educational system, the writing system, discrimination of various kinds, both direct and indirect, against non-standard speakers). Thus some scholars (Giles *et al.*, 1974, 1975; Leith, 1983) speak of the standard as an imposed, or superposed, variety. Once it is well established and has defeated its competitors, the standard language must then be *maintained*. Maintenance comes about through various means. As a result of *elaboration of function*, the standard is perceived by those who are socially mobile to be of more value than other varieties for purely utilitarian ends. It also acquires *prestige*, as it is noticed that the most successful people use it in writing and, to a great extent, in speech. It is also maintained through the inculcation of literacy, as the writing system is then held up as the model of 'correctness' (see below). Thus, the writing system serves as one of the sources of prescriptive norms, and *prescription* becomes more intense after the language undergoes *codification* (as in eighteenth century England), because speakers then have access to dictionaries and grammar-books, which they regard as authorities. They tend to believe that the 'language' is enshrined in these books (however many mistakes and omissions there may be in them) rather than in the linguistic and communicative competence of the millions who use the language every day.

The account we have given of these stages in the standardisation process is not precisely the same as that given by others, and the reader should note that these hypothetical stages do not necessarily follow one another in temporal succession. Some stages may overlap with others, and the stage we have described as *maintenance*

starts quite early in the process and then continues throughout. We prefer to consider these stages as stages of *implementation* of the standard rather than as aspects of standardisation itself. The process of standardisation (strictly defined) is based on the idea of aiming, by any means possible, at uniformity. These additional stages are stages that have been observed to follow from the ideology of standardisation, which in the case of English was explicitly espoused by Caxton as long ago as 1490. However this may be, the ideology of the standard is still with us, and we pass on in the next chapter to discuss some of the ways in which the process of maintaining the idea of a standard is implemented at the present day.

2

Standard English and the complaint tradition

2.1 The history of Standard English

Most people are of the opinion that the influence of the mass media in recent times has had a powerful effect in reducing the diversity of English and bringing about uniformity. This is not a proven fact: it is merely a belief. In favour of this view, it can be reasonably argued that remote rural dialects have been dying out quite rapidly. Against it, we can point out that although the Received Pronunciation of Standard English has been heard constantly on radio and then television for over 60 years, only 3 to 5% of the population of Britain actually speak RP (Trudgill and Hannah, 1982). It can also be pointed out that the spread of English to former colonies has continued to create diversity, and new brands of English have been springing up even in recent times (on Singaporean English, see Chapter 5).

There are three areas of research that suggest that the promotion of standardisation through official and centralised channels is less widely effective than is generally believed. One is the study of variation in English in the British Isles. The phonological structure (pronunciation) of regional forms of English does not appear to adapt rapidly towards the standard. For example Belfast English (as described by J. Milroy, 1981) has a radically different phonological system from that of SE, and that system remains different in spite of radio, television and the educational system. Belfast English (and other Hiberno-English) pronunciation preserves certain structural characteristics of Early Modern English that have long been lost in SE (Milroy and Harris, 1980): these varieties and many others, although they change quite rapidly in some ways, have successfully resisted centralising influences for centuries. A second relevant area is research into the language of the mass media

themselves. For example, Bell (1982), in a study of the language of several New Zealand radio channels, has shown that broadcasters tend to adapt to the language of their target audiences, following rather than leading in language variation and change. A third relevant area (one that has not been noticed so far by linguistic researchers) is the general study of diffusion of innovations in society (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971, and see Milroy and Milroy, forthcoming).

The general concern of this tradition of research is with the manner in which innovations of any kind – for example, in fashion, speech or technology – eventually become widely adopted by a population. Rogers and Shoemaker note that a number of very general principles can be discerned in the process of diffusion and adoption, and the finding which is of relevance here is that *personal* channels of communication are very much more influential than *mass media* channels in persuading persons to adopt innovations. Generally, mass media channels effectively give rise to *awareness* of an innovation, but have little influence in promoting *adoption*. There is no reason to think that the diffusion of linguistic innovations will follow principles different from those governing the diffusion of other kinds of innovation. Indeed, it seems to be the case that the media have successfully promoted an awareness of the standard spoken language (which is in fact popularly known as BBC English) without having much influence on the rate of adoption of that standard. As we shall see, a number of factors relating to the individual speaker's everyday social contacts seem, as diffusion theory would predict, to be the major influences on the language behaviour of the individual speaker.

There is therefore little evidence to support the popular view that mass communications inevitably bring about uniformity of usage; yet we can say that standardisation has advanced over the centuries *in certain ways*. First, there is no doubt that great uniformity has been achieved in the *written* channel: the scribe of *Havelok the Dane* (c. 1300) used a writing system that permitted many variations in spelling: the word *right*, for example, could be spelt as *riht*, *rith*, *richt*, *ricth*, *rist*. Twentieth-century spelling, on the other hand, permits virtually no variation. The second sense in which standardisation may be said to have advanced is in the promotion of a standard ideology, i.e. a public *consciousness* of the standard. People *believe* that there is a 'right' way of using English, although they do not necessarily use the 'correct' forms in their own speech.

Thus, although radio, film and television may not have had much influence on everyday speech, they are amongst the many influences that promote a consciousness of the standard and maintain its position.

In these special senses, the standardisation of English has been in progress for many centuries. The process of linguistic normalisation can be traced in the gradual progression towards greater uniformity in *written* English. Similarly, the *elaboration of function* that is associated with standardisation can be traced in the spread of English into all areas of life: in the Middle Ages after the Norman Conquest, English was seldom used in legal or administrative functions (Norman French being the 'official' language), and Latin rather than English remained the language of learning to a great extent even as late as the seventeenth century. In 1545 the physician Thomas Phaïre had to apologise for writing in English and complained (Neale and Wallis, eds 1957:13):

why grutche they phisyke to come forth in Englyshe? Woulde they have no man to know but onely they?

('Why are they reluctant to allow medical knowledge to be made public in English? Do they want no one but themselves to know?')

Complaints like that of Phaïre reflect consciousness of the need for the native language to be used in a greater variety of functions, and elaboration of function necessarily involves elaboration of vocabulary. We shall see that one aspect of the 'linguistic complaint' tradition is directly concerned with this elaborated vocabulary (see 2.3 below).

In this chapter we are concerned with the progressive standardisation of English, but in particular with the way in which the standard ideology has been, and is being, promoted and maintained. One useful way of charting the history of standardisation is to look at the history of linguistic *complaint* from the Middle Ages onward, and to relate this to present-day continuations of the complaint tradition.

Medieval complaints about language were not usually of the kind that have become most familiar since about 1700, i.e. complaints about supposed incorrect usage; they were more concerned with the relative status of French and English in the Kingdom. They therefore reflect the gradual rise in the status of English and, indirectly, the movement towards elaboration in the functions of

English. Already in the early fourteenth century it is clear that French is no longer in general use, although it is officially required. In 1327, for example, Ranulph Higden complains that English is being corrupted by French and attributes this corruption to the fact that schoolchildren are forced to abandon their own language and construe their lessons in French. By the middle of the century, however, lessons were being taught in English. John Trevisa (the translator of Higden's *Polychronicon*) observes that this has advantages and disadvantages, the main disadvantage being that children now know no more French than does 'their left heel'. He also remarks that even gentlemen 'haueþ now moche i-left for to teche here children Frensche' ('have now largely abandoned teaching their children French').

These comments are symptoms of the movement towards establishing English, rather than French, as the official language of England. This official status was recognised to an extent by the Statute of Pleading in 1362, which made English a language of the lawcourts (for a discussion of the fourteenth-century language situation see Baugh and Cable, 1978:143–50).

After the demise of French, the social history of English can be described as a long and gradual struggle to acquire greater respectability and a wide range of official, public and academic functions, not merely as the language of administration and law, but also as the language of printed books and of science, medicine, theology and philosophy. This struggle to acquire more functions involved progressive *elaboration* of vocabulary, and is reflected in the complaints of many writers. The struggle to promote *uniformity* in written usage can also be traced in the complaint tradition.

The most important early complaint about the form of English (as distinct from its status and functions) is that of William Caxton (1490), the earliest English printer. Caxton complained that the language was too variable, and that people from different places could hardly understand one another. He was quite clearly implying that standardisation in the strict sense (lack of variation in form) was needed.

And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne. For we englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, whiche is neuer stedfaste, but euer wauerynge, wexynge one season, and waneth & dycreaseth another season. And that comyn englysshe

that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother . . . certaynly it is harde to playse euery man by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. (Bolton, 1966:2–3)

Caxton, as a publisher, had pressing practical reasons for desiring a standard written form of the language. He solved his problem by using as the literary standard a variety based on the South-East Midland area, but his selection was not made on strictly linguistic grounds. The variety he decided to use had already achieved some prominence – but not necessarily because it was the most expressive or the most beautiful. It was the obvious choice because the area concerned was the most prominent politically, commercially and academically. This variety is the basis of modern Standard English. If the North-West of England had been the most influential area, Standard English would be a descendant of the dialect of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a long, courtly poem in the Arthurian tradition), and it would be a very different form of Standard English from what we actually have today. All the dialects of English were in principle equally good candidates (on linguistic grounds) for standardisation, but from the fifteenth century onwards the SE Midland variety was superimposed on the others as a standard (for a discussion see Leith, 1983:32–57).

Complaints about English in the sixteenth century usually focus on its supposed inadequacies when compared with Latin and Greek and even with other more fashionable non-classical languages such as French and Italian. They are associated with the rise to prominence of English as a 'standard' language in so far as they reflect the feeling that English needed a wider vocabulary. Often, the writers complain in terms of the lack of 'eloquence' of English, but underlying these complaints are the political and commercial pressures that made it necessary for the language to have an elaborated vocabulary.

Complaints about specific aspects of English usage (e.g. use of prepositions and fine distinctions between meanings of different words) do not commonly occur until the position of English as the official language (in almost all its functions) was virtually assured – around 1700. The great classic of complaint literature is Swift's (1712) 'Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue', which, after a polite preamble, begins as follows:

My Lord, I do here, in the name of all the learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to Your Lordship as *First*

Minister, that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; that the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar. (Bolton, 1966:108)

These sentiments expressed here remain familiar at the present day. Indeed the contents of Swift's 'Proposal' anticipate, in principle, almost every attitude expressed in modern complaint literature (on which see below).

Swift recommended that an official body (similar to the Academies of France and Italy) should be set up, first to improve the language, and second, to 'ascertain' (we might now say 'standardise') it. He said that he could see no reason why language should be perpetually changing and believed that English had perceptibly declined since the Restoration (in 1660). As usual in complaint literature, someone or something had to be blamed for this supposed decline. Today it is often the teaching profession or politicians (Orwell, 1946), and sometimes, as we have seen, the scapegoat is now the discipline of linguistics itself (Simon, 1980; Honey, 1983). Swift blamed the loose morals of the post-Restoration period – 'University boys' and frequenters of coffee-houses. However, in his argument he made it clear that he regarded the basic problem to be the fact of variation and change in language: in his complaint he was, amongst other things, reflecting the need of a developing nation and colonial power to have a relatively fixed standard language for the practical purpose of clear communication over long distances and periods of time (chiefly in writing, but also presumably in speech).

It is well known that in linguistic matters, the eighteenth century was largely, but not wholly, a century of authoritarianism and prescription. During that century much of the necessary work of *codifying* the standard language was carried out, notably in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) and in a spate of grammar books by such men as Bishop Lowth (1762) and Lindley Murray (1795). The task of Swift's proposed academy was in fact carried out informally by private persons. The tone of most of this work was legislative, setting out how the language ought to be used, not necessarily how it actually *was* used by the majority of people. To that period we owe many of the school grammar prescriptions that are current today, such as the ban on double (or multiple) negatives, and the preference for 'different *from*' and 'It is *I*'.

It is difficult to assess how successful the eighteenth-century legislators were in achieving their aim of suppressing variation in language. They seem to have been successful in codifying a set of conventions appropriate for the written language – conventions which have not changed greatly since that time. The orthography, for example, has changed very little since Dr Johnson codified the spelling in his dictionary. Clearly, they were answering the need of a developing nation for reliable communication in writing, and in this they have been generally successful.

They have had much less success in preventing change in the *spoken* language. The economic and social upheavals of the nineteenth century resulted in the rise of large industrial cities whose distinctive dialects now differ from the rural areas around them and also from high prestige English; many millions of speakers use them. As a result, multiple negatives and hundreds of other 'non-standard' features continue to enjoy a flourishing life. Even in the eighteenth century, the greatest English language scholar of the time finally came to realise the futility of attempting to prevent all change. After his labours on the dictionary (which was at first intended to prescribe and standardise usage), Dr Johnson had this to say:

with...justice may the lexicographer be derided, who...shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language...

With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. (Bolton, 1966: 151–2)

Modern inheritors of the prescriptive tradition would do well to emulate this wisdom and humility, acquired as it had been from extensive language scholarship over many years. As we shall see, they seldom do, and they seldom have adequate knowledge of the nature of language.

The achievement of the eighteenth century has sometimes been disparaged. Some modern scholars have been hostile to that achievement and have been very scathing about the 'traditional grammar' and 'notions of correctness' that derive from that century. While it is true that the language has continued to change despite the legislators of that century, and while it is also true that

many of their prescriptions (e.g. *it is I* rather than *it's me*) are absurd when applied to speech, the eighteenth century was a successful culmination of a long process. Its achievement was to establish, through codification, a much more widespread consciousness of a relatively uniform 'correct' English than had been possible before. Advances in technology and means of communication were at the same time spreading the written word much more widely than ever before. Subsequent advances in literacy and in mass education have continued to ensure that the public has looked to the relatively standardised written channel as the model of correctness, despite the fact that spoken English has continued to change. What the eighteenth century finally established was what we have called the *ideology of standardisation*, to which virtually every speaker now subscribes in principle.

In Chapter 3 we shall go on to consider in more detail the nature of language change and the opposing mechanisms of language maintenance (including codification of the kind achieved in the eighteenth century). In the remainder of this chapter we focus on twentieth-century continuations of the complaint tradition.

2.2 The function of language complaints in maintaining the standard

We have suggested that the chief linguistic characteristic of standardisation is suppression of optional variation at all levels of language – in pronunciation (phonology), spelling, grammar (morphology and syntax) and lexicon. Standardisation is therefore partly aimed at preventing or inhibiting linguistic change (Swift, 1712). It is clear that the movement towards a national standard language in England arose not primarily because authoritarian individuals wished to impose complete conformity on everyone else, but in response to wider social, political and commercial needs. Caxton needed a standard language for printed books, and eighteenth-century authoritarianism was a symptom of the requirements of British society at that time. Standardisation, particularly in the written channel, was needed for reasons of efficient communication over long distances and periods of time.

The standard ideology is promoted through public channels: in the past, standardisation has first affected the writing system, and literacy has subsequently become the main influence in promoting

the consciousness of the standard ideology. The norms of written and formal English have then been codified in dictionaries, grammars and handbooks of usage and inculcated by prescription through the educational system. Standardisation through prescription has clearly been most successful in the written channel: in the daily conversation of ordinary speakers, however, it has been less effective. Indeed, the norms of colloquial, as against formal, English have not been codified to any extent.

The effect of codification and prescription has been to *legitimise* the norms of formal registers of standard English rather than the norms of everyday spoken English. Codifiers have legislated and prescribers have tried to put the legislation into effect. One result of this is that there is a general belief that there is only one form of correct, i.e. legitimate, English, and a feeling that colloquial and non-standard forms are perverse and deliberate deviations from what is approved by 'law'; i.e. they are 'illegitimate'.

Outside the schoolroom, the standard ideology has been most openly promoted by writers in what we have called 'the complaint tradition'. This tradition can, however, be divided into two broad types. It is most important that the characteristics of these types should be clearly distinguished, as a failure to recognise their different aims can result in vagueness and confusion in popular commentaries on language use (see for example 2.5 below).

Type 1 complaints, which are implicitly legalistic and which are concerned with correctness, attack 'misuse' of specific parts of the phonology, grammar, vocabulary of English (and in the case of written English 'errors' of spelling, punctuation, etc.). Type 2 complaints, which we may call 'moralistic', recommend clarity in writing and attack what appear to be abuses of language that may mislead and confuse the public. The elements of Type 1 complaints are fully anticipated in Swift's proposal of 1712, except that Swift argued his case more fully and skilfully than any twentieth-century Type 1 complaints that we have seen (he specified quite clearly that he was promoting standardisation), and some elements of Type 2 complaints are also anticipated by Swift. The correctness tradition (Type 1) is wholly dedicated to the maintenance of the norms of standard English in preference to other varieties: sometimes writers in this tradition attempt to justify the usages they favour and condemn those they dislike by appeals to logic, etymology and so forth. Very often, however, they make no attempt whatever to explain why one usage is correct and another incorrect: they simply

take it for granted that the proscribed form is *obviously* unacceptable and illegitimate; in short, they believe in a transcendental norm of correct English.

Type 2 complaints do not devote themselves to stigmatising specific errors in grammar, phonology, and so on. They accept the fact of standardisation in the written channel, and they are concerned with clarity, effectiveness, morality and honesty in the public use of the standard language. Sometimes elements of Type 1 can enter into Type 2 complaints, in that the writers may sometimes condemn non-standard usage in the belief that it is careless or in some way reprehensible; yet the two types of complaint can in general be sharply distinguished. The most important modern author in this second tradition is George Orwell, and we shall consider his views in 2.4; in the remainder of this section, we consider the tradition of 'correctness'.

Type 1 complaints (on correctness) may be directed against 'errors' in either spoken or written language, and they frequently do not make a very clear distinction between the two. Simon (1980), for example, complains about misuse of apostrophes – as in *wing's* (plural) for *wings* –, but also about spoken usage, such as *you was* for *you were*. He lumps all these 'faults' together as 'illiteracies', clearly assuming that the model for spoken language lies in the written channel, and believing that all reasonable readers will agree with him. The structure and function of spoken language, however, is altogether different from that of written language (see below, Chapter 3.2, 3.3).

From vast numbers of letters to newspapers, we may quote the following complaint about spoken usage as typical:

For many years I have been disgusted with the bad grammar used by school-leavers and teachers too sometimes, but recently on the lunch-time news, when a secretary, who had just started work with a firm, was interviewed her first words were: 'I looked up and seen two men' etc. It's unbelievable to think, with so many young people out of work, that she could get such a job, but perhaps 'I seen' and 'I done' etc., is the usual grammar nowadays for office staff and business training colleges. ('Have Went'; Saintfield, N. Ireland).

This correspondent no doubt sees him or herself as a guardian of 'correctness', and the letter is clearly predicated on the assumption that if people want to get decent jobs they ought to speak cor-

rectly (just as they should have good table manners). It is implied that the secretary who says *seen* for *saw* may be keeping better people (who speak correctly) out of jobs, and the remark that "'I seen" and "I done" etc.' may be the 'usual grammar nowadays' carries with it the implication that at some time in the past standards of language use were better than they are now. The idea of linguistic decline is always either directly addressed or hinted at in the correctness tradition. Furthermore, the idea of linguistic decline usually carries with it the implication that general standards of conduct and morality in society are also in decline. The clearest statement of this view, as we have noted, is contained in Swift's 'Proposal', but see also the remarks of Rae (1982) quoted in 2.5.

It is unlikely that 'Have Went' fully understands the social function that he or she is carrying out. The letter is one of thousands of similar contributions to the maintenance of a standard language, and discrimination against those who do not use it in speech. Nor is the correspondent aware that attempts to maintain a single *spoken* standard have not been very successful. The choice of *saw* as the 'correct' form is ultimately arbitrary, and despite the efforts of the complaint tradition, many millions of people persist in their daily conversation in using non-standard grammatical forms, e.g.

- 'You was there, wasn't you?'
- 'I never said nothing.'
- 'Them houses is nice.'
- 'It were a right mess.'
- 'That's the man what I saw yesterday.'

The arbitrariness of some of these judgements must at this point be noticed again. Expressions like *you was* appear to have been fashionable in polite society in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Wyld, 1936); 19th century novelists represent well-educated characters as using *he don't*; in earlier times the *for-to* complement, as in *he went down the road for to see his mother* was normal in literary English (e.g. in Chaucer and Caxton). Shakespeare and his contemporaries used double negatives in their writing and often failed to distinguish between past tense and past participle forms, as in

'I have already *chose* my officer.' (*Othello*, I, 1)

In pronunciation, it appears that the present-day substitution of [ɪn] for [ɪŋ], as in *huntin'* for *hunting*, has a long and complicated

history that suggests that the [ɪn] form is closer to the 'original': it is also well known that upper-class speakers in living memory stereotypically used such expressions as *huntin'*, *shootin'* and *fishin'*. One of the most stigmatised forms of all – [h]-dropping – also appears (as we have seen) to have a long history (J. Milroy, 1983), and it may also have been fashionable in middle-class and/or polite society in Elizabethan times and before. Thus usages that are favoured at one time may be stigmatised at another for reasons that have nothing to do with linguistic values, but which are purely social.

Complaints about non-standard usage, however, continue to appear in very large numbers in newspapers and journals. Sometimes full-length books appear that promote the use of 'correct' English and criticise the supposed decline of the language (although such books normally contain or imply elements of both types of complaint). The writers concerned range all the way from ordinary newspaper readers to prominent journalists and established literary men and women. To the extent that such complaints are of Type 1, they universally share the assumptions of 'Have Went, Saintfield'. These may be summarised as follows:

1. That there is one, and only one, correct way of speaking and/or writing the English language.
2. That deviations from this norm are illiteracies, or barbarisms, and that non-standard forms are irregular and perversely deviant.
3. That people *ought* to use the standard language and that it is quite right to discriminate against non-standard users, as such usage is a sign of stupidity, ignorance, perversity, moral degeneracy, etc.

Thus, while Type 1 complaints appear to be attacks on detailed points of *usage*, they are actually making claims about the superiority of one language *system* over another (without usually being explicit about this, and often being apparently unaware of it). The assumption is that a particular abstract set of linguistic rules (in phonology, spelling, grammar and lexicon) is inherently superior to some other abstract set. In this way, Type 1 complaints must be sharply distinguished from the 'moralistic' complaints of Type 2. The latter do not focus on non-standard deviations from standard norms, but are concerned with the *usage* of *standard* English in public, formal and written channels, and the effects of such usage on society and human behaviour.

2.3 Correctness and semantic shift

Complaints about correctness of the kind represented by Simon (1980) and 'Have Went' are extremely common, and they extend back for centuries. Although there is little change in the substance of the complaints, they seem to have had little or no effect on usage. No matter how often the writers complain about 'you was' and the misuse of apostrophes, millions of people cheerfully continue to use the proscribed forms, and dialects that differ from the standard language continue to flourish.

Type 2 complaints, as we have pointed out, differ radically from these, as they are generally concerned with public usage in written and formal styles: they attempt to encourage clarity, precision and effectiveness in the use of *standard* English. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to classify a particular complaint as belonging clearly to one of these two types. Complaints about careless usage of written *vocabulary* are very common, and they can often be said to contain characteristics of both types. In so far as they oppose the tendency of language to change, they are of Type 1; in so far as they are concerned with careful and effective written usage, they are of Type 2.

A well-reasoned example of this mixed type is an essay by Kingsley Amis (1980) entitled 'Getting it wrong'. Amis is concerned primarily with lexical confusion (malapropism), but also with slightly vague or 'incorrect' usage of words. His many examples are drawn from the written work of professional journalists and authors, who might well be expected 'to know better'.

Malapropisms arise from accidental phonetic similarities between words of different meanings, and Amis's examples include many common 'mistakes', such as confusion of *flout*: 'express contempt for' with *flaunt*: 'wave, show off', as in

It flaunts (i.e. flouts) every rational calculation of British currency.

Other examples are *mitigate* for 'militate' and *perpetrate* for 'perpetuate'. Amis also cites examples, however, that are not so much malapropisms as slight semantic shifts: the words concerned are used, not in completely unrelated meanings (as in malapropisms), but in slightly shifted meanings that are considered to be incorrect. An example of this is the use of *crescendo* ('a noise that rises from soft to loud') to mean 'a loud noise', thus an expression such as 'the sound rose to a crescendo' is considered to be incorrect.

Malapropisms do not usually lead to permanent change of meaning (although it must be admitted that *flaunt* for *flout* is at present a strong candidate), but slight semantic shifts of a logically motivated kind are the very stuff of semantic change. Such shifts lead in the first place to *polysemy* (the development of more than one meaning), and in the course of time the etymological meaning may be forgotten, as transferred but related meanings take over. For Milton, *obvious* meant 'in the way' (Latin, *ob*: 'against'; *via*: 'way'), and 'the extravagant and erring spirit' of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* did not spend lavishly or make mistakes: *extravagant* and *erring* had their etymological meanings: 'straying outside' and 'wandering'. There must have been some time in the past when the literal meanings of these words co-existed with the present-day transferred or figurative meanings.

In cases like *crescendo*, and in the common use of *aggravate* to mean 'annoy', we are witnessing the same process. In musical terminology, *crescendo* will continue to be used in its precise technical sense, while the average speaker will continue to 'misuse' it, but in a closely associated meaning. In effect, this word, with thousands of others, has developed two related meanings, and statements by the guardians will not prevent or reverse such changes. Semantic change is a universal process.

It is possible, however, that the English language has been in recent centuries particularly prone to rapid semantic change for the reason that it has annexed a vast elaborated vocabulary that is not native to English. This vocabulary (which includes *crescendo*, *perpetuate*, *mitigate* and so forth) is literary, formal or technical: the average speaker makes use of it much less often than writers do, and access to this vocabulary is difficult for those who do not have extensive classical and humanistic education. It is to be expected that, as these words pass from formal and literary usage into occasional use in speech, their meanings will drift. Thus the elaborated vocabulary that is associated with standardisation may itself be a liability in so far as it provides a focus for semantic shift – a tendency that standardisation attempts to suppress.

Professional writers usually prefer to fight a rearguard action on semantic change, and it is 'worth enquiring why this is so and whether it should be so. We may attempt to answer the first question by pointing to the differences that naturally exist between the functions of written language and those of conversational speech, and the tensions set up by these differences. For various reasons,

written language (especially prose) has to be more careful and precise than spoken; the effects of ambiguity and vagueness are more difficult to overcome in writing than in speech: miscomprehension of a written text (arising from careless writing) cannot be repaired, as the writer is not present to explain 'what he really meant' when the text is being read. Uncontrolled semantic change can therefore be dysfunctional for writers. If words change in meaning too rapidly, their writings could be misunderstood at some later date.

As written texts can survive over long periods, professional writers often interpret the forces of linguistic change as inimical to their own interests. One of Swift's (1712) motives for proposing 'ascertainment' of the language was to make sure that eighteenth-century writing would be comprehensible to future generations. Alexander Pope pointed to the language of Chaucer, which, after only three centuries, had become difficult to read; he lamented,

'For such as Chaucer is shall Dryden be'.

The same general motive seems to underlie the efforts of present day authors: they may feel it to be in their own interests (and the general interest) to promote the standard ideology, as this tends to ensure reliability in the use of what we have called 'the counters in the system' (1.5), and therefore maintains some control over language change.

Yet, although professional writers have usually spoken in favour of fixed and stable linguistic forms, there is one sense in which it might not be appropriate for them to do so. It is not professional writers, but lawyers, administrators and scientists, who require the most rigid forms of standardisation. A legal document (unlike a novel or poem) must be drawn up in such a way that it cannot be subject to varying interpretations, and the terms used must have precise meanings. Similarly, technical terminology in scientific disciplines must be precise. One might therefore expect imaginative writers to wish to exploit flexibility and variation in language, rather than upholding narrow versions of the standard ideology. Some innovative writers have in fact done this; yet it was a poet and critic who uttered this strong statement on the fixed meanings of words: 'Words...represent concepts...(they communicate) by virtue of their conceptual identity, and in so far as this identity is impaired, they will communicate with less force and precision' (Winters, 1966: 37–8).

The professional writer's position in this matter is a difficult one. In upholding the standard ideology, he is acting partly in his own interests, but mainly in what he interprets as the general interest. It is in the interests of society that written and formal communication should be as precise and unambiguous as possible, but not perhaps wholly in the interests of imaginative writers. If literary people expound views on language that are narrow, pedantic and unrealistic, they may have the effect of inhibiting innovation and creativity in imaginative writing. One author who clearly understood the social functions of the written channel was George Orwell: we shall consider his work in the next section.

2.4 George Orwell and the moralistic tradition

Orwell was a moralist, and in linguistic matters he was to a great extent also a realist. Most of his work contains occasional comments that amount to criticism of language use – usually criticism of centralised and bureaucratic language. His best-known criticisms, however, are embodied in the essay 'Politics and the English Language' and in the invented language 'Newspeak' in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But in a lesser-known essay, 'Propaganda and Demotic Speech' (1944), Orwell makes it clear that he understands more about language use than most of those who complain about usage.

Orwell's complaints focus on the distance between centralised, bureaucratic language and the 'real' usage of ordinary people. Unlike writers in the correctness tradition, he represents a position that is *against* some aspects of the standard ideology (at least in so far as it is manifested in formal styles) and *in favour of* 'demotic speech'. He mentions the stilted bookish language (cf. the elaborated vocabulary that we discussed above) and upper class accents of the news bulletins, and comments that this language is totally ineffective in communicating with the ordinary public. He attacks the artificiality and emptiness of propaganda slogans and political jargon – *objectively, counter-revolutionary, left-deviationism* and the like. Orwell is concerned with failures in communication and with the appropriacy of language styles to their purposes. In the 1944 essay, his most important general point is that there is a huge gap between written and spoken language. Few, if any, of the language complaint writers have recognised this

clearly, possibly because their interests have been narrower than those of Orwell; they have not taken as much interest in the multiple *social* functions of language.

'The main weakness of propagandists and popularizers', says Orwell, 'is their failure to notice that spoken and written language are two different things.' Lecturers use elaborated clause structures that may be appropriate to formal written language, but which are not appropriate in speech because they are difficult to comprehend. Broadcasters use words that are literary in nature: the vocabulary of English, he says, contains thousands of words used in writing that have 'no real currency' in speech (they are in fact drawn from the elaborated vocabulary of standard literary English). As he is largely concerned with broadcast language, he then goes on to recommend ways of making it sound more like spoken English. 'To get genuine spoken English on to paper is a complicated matter.' Unlike most of the complaint writers, Orwell then goes on to make positive proposals for improvement.

When in 'Politics and the English Language', Orwell says that 'the English language is in a bad way', it is not therefore ordinary English speech that he is criticising. As the rest of the essay makes quite clear, he is disturbed by the dead metaphors (of politicians and other public figures) that are 'tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse': his own excellent writing actually shows that the language *as a whole* is more than serviceable, and not in 'a bad way'. Orwell's concern here, and in the 'language' 'Newspeak' of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is with the idea that 'misuse' of language can corrupt thought. Euphemistic jargon can 'make murder respectable and give the appearance of solidity to pure wind'.

Orwell's ideas are of the greatest interest to those who are concerned with the nature of authority in language and with language prescription. The linguistic abuses that he is criticising are not primarily found in the colloquial speech of ordinary people: they are found in centralised and official speeches and documents, and they are uttered or written in 'standard English'. He is criticising authority in language and some aspects of language use that are consequences of standardisation.

However forceful and original his views may seem to be, Orwell's work can be seen as related to at least two other traditions in language study. One is the 'Pure English' tradition, which surfaced in the sixteenth century and then reappeared in a stronger

form in the nineteenth. The other is a view of language associated with the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir. In its strongest form, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proposes that our thought processes are conditioned by the structure of the language we speak. In his parable of the future, Orwell envisages an authoritarian state in which the expressive and intellectual content of language has been reduced to nothing, and in which users of the language are denied access to critical and abstract thought by the limitations deliberately imposed on that language. It would be an exaggeration to say that Newspeak is the ultimate in language *standardisation*, but it is the ultimate in centrally planned and imposed use of language.

'Official' language is characterised by a relatively high proportion of words borrowed from Latin and Greek; as Orwell certainly perceived, and as we have noted above, access to this elaborated vocabulary is not particularly easy for the ordinary person. While explorations of the resources of this vocabulary need not be condemned in themselves (e.g. in the work of great literary men like Milton and Dr Johnson), it is of course possible to cover up emptiness of thought by using this vocabulary, and even (consciously or unconsciously) to deny access to ideas to those who have not had the necessary classical education. The purist tradition in English letters (of which Orwell is partly an inheritor) has always opposed wholesale use of classical vocabulary and has recommended reliance on Anglo-Saxon words. In the nineteenth century some scholars of language and literature went to great extremes in objecting to foreign borrowing in English. In so doing, they appear to have been motivated, like Orwell, by objections to over-centralised and 'artificial' forms of language, and they tended to view the real and 'natural' form of language as being in the vernacular speech of ordinary people. For a discussion of this tradition see J. Milroy (1977).

Orwell may not have known the work of Whorf (d. 1941) or Sapir (d. 1939) and may independently have come to the conclusion that language can corrupt thought. Sapir and Whorf did not, of course, speak of *corruption*. One of their points was that some languages have grammatical structures that may condition their speakers to think in ways that differ from European ways. The language of the Hopi Indians, for instance (Whorf, 1941), has a verbal system that is arranged in terms of types of movement (spirals, curves and so on) rather than in terms of time distinctions

(past, present and future). It might be argued therefore that the language system of Hopi is more suitable than English for subjects like physics. Language scholars do not now accept the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its strong form: obviously, it can be pointed out that advances in physics have actually been made in Western European languages and not in Hopi, and that English (however its verb system is arranged) is just as capable of being used to express types of movement as any other language. We can afford to be rather less pessimistic than Orwell was about the possibility of an authoritarian government completely and permanently removing all possibility of creative thought from a language.

In 'Newspeak' Orwell considers the possibility that extreme authoritarian prescription could actually affect language quite radically at the level of *system* rather than merely at the level of *use*. He represents government intervention as fixing the meanings of words in purely literal senses. Thus, for example, the word *free* can be used in 'Newspeak' in a literal way in reference to a physical event, such as letting an animal go 'free' from a trap, but it cannot take on transferred, metaphorical and abstract meanings, for example to refer to 'freedom from tyranny'. Thus notions like political freedom and other ideas that might help people to think abstractly are effectively suppressed from the language and therefore from thought.

The authorities in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had not merely interfered with words; they had interfered with abstract sense relations and processes that underlie the use of words and form the semantic structure of a language. They even seem to have suppressed systems of antonyms: the opposite of *good* was not *bad*, but the simple negative *ungood*. It is inconceivable that government intervention in *language use* could actually go as far as this: no language could be limited and fixed to the extent that transfer of meaning and figurative use of vocabulary could not take place. It is true that an authoritarian government can directly limit freedom of thought and public expression of ideas, but it cannot directly intervene in language structure in order to destroy the human capacity to exploit linguistic resources. All languages change and vary despite attempts to fix and standardise them. Orwell's 'Newspeak' exemplifies an impossible extreme of the prescriptive ideology.

Orwell's basic complaints were actually about society, morality and politics, and he chose language as a means of criticising society. He exhorts us to use the language carefully and precisely

and to be critical about cliché and jargon in the use of language. In a much less spectacular way than that envisaged in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell was of course right: we can be lulled into complacency through manipulative use of language by politicians and others on the mass media. One politician may be said to have *refuted* ('disproved') the argument of another when he has merely denied it; the murder of a village postman in Ulster may be reported as an *assassination*; destruction of Vietnamese villages may be described as *pacification*. Creeping paralysis in the understanding of events as reported through language, and ultimately in the use of certain parts of the language, can indeed be induced by centralised and public manipulation of language. The fault, however, does not lie in the language itself: it lies in the way that certain resources of language are being used and passively received. It is always possible for those resources to be used in responsible, thoughtful and critical ways.

Other complaints about careless and inaccurate use of a standard literary language do not usually have the depth, breadth and incisiveness of Orwell's complaints. Whereas others are often inclined to accept a certain degree of authoritarianism without necessarily reflecting on its implications, Orwell's ultimate position is anti-authoritarian and in favour of the ordinary user of language. In the next section, we shall see that similar concerns about effectiveness and clarity play some part in the views of educators in the teaching of literacy; however they can sometimes become confused with the concerns of Type 1 complaints on 'correctness'.

2.5 Standardisation and the teaching of literacy

It is probable that judgments about clarity and effectiveness in the use of language are universal to all human societies. In pre-literate societies, for example, it appears that it is not different *varieties* of language that are judged as 'better' or 'worse': judgments are confined to whether or not a given speaker communicates effectively and clearly (Mühlhäusler, 1982). To some extent, the kind of language criticism represented in Orwell's work is the same as this. Complaints about *correctness*, however, are typically found in communities that have highly developed standard languages, and we have suggested that the function of these complaints is to maintain public acceptance of one variety as superior to others. Unfortunately, these two separate concerns often become confused in

public debates about the state of the language and the state of English teaching.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of public discussion about the teaching of English in schools. In the 1950s and 1960s, following the early work of Basil Bernstein, educationalists seized on language use as a way of explaining the failure of many working-class children to do well at school. They made use of Bernstein's distinction between the 'context-tied' restricted code and the 'context-free' elaborated code: working-class children, it was claimed, made relatively little use of the elaborated code, and it was sometimes believed that they did not have access to it. Thus, educational failure could be explained as due to unwillingness or inability to switch linguistically away from conversational language (in which mutual knowledge and background information are taken for granted) into something more like the language of prose (the context-free elaborated code). Clearly, Bernstein's distinction has much in common with a distinction that we shall make in Chapter 3 between informal conversational speech on the one hand and writing on the other. The difficulties that children face at school might indeed be better explained by a theory based on standardisation, such as we are developing in this book.

At about the same time, however, the teaching of traditional grammar declined in our school-system. This appears to have had serious consequences in language teaching generally, not because traditional grammar was abandoned, but because it was not immediately replaced by an equally good or better system of describing linguistic forms. Advances made by linguists in descriptive grammar have not for the most part been understood outside linguistics. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 1 general linguists are sometimes actually blamed for what has often been seen as a decline in standards of English teaching.

Problems in teaching the mother tongue have given rise to certain complaints, the main features of which have much in common with the complaint tradition. The first characteristic of this is a conviction that standards are declining and that they were at one time higher than they are now. In an article in the *Observer* (7 February 1982), John Rae, the Head Master of Westminster School, complains that there is a decline in literacy. A second characteristic of the tradition is that someone or something has to be blamed for the supposed decline. Rae blames the abandonment of formal grammar teaching and its replacement with creative writing teaching.

His article contains some other interesting arguments: for example, he claims that it is working-class children who have suffered the consequences of this decline: 'to working-class children the English language was an essential tool if they wanted to get on; if they were denied this and other basic skills they would effectively be kept in their place.' Another interesting feature of Rae's argument is the association of language and morality:

The overthrow of grammar coincided with the acceptance of the equivalent of creative writing in social behaviour. As nice points of grammar were mockingly dismissed as pedantic and irrelevant, so was punctiliousness in such matters as honesty, responsibility, property, gratitude, apology and so on.

Compare the views of Swift (1712), who, in a longer analysis of the causes of linguistic corruption, had this to say: 'To this succeeded that Licentiousness which entered with the *Restoration*, and from infecting our Religion and Morals, fell to corrupt our Language' (Bolton, 1966: 112). There is little that is new in the complaint tradition.

As Rae's arguments appear at first sight to be very plausible it is important that we point out some difficulties. The first difficulty is in Rae's presupposition that there has been a general decline in literacy since about 1960. There is no very good reason to think that general standards of literacy have ever been very high: the bulk of our population over the past few generations has been able to read and write, but relatively few have achieved high levels of literacy. In recent years, tertiary education has greatly expanded: a higher proportion of the population is therefore likely to have attained a reasonably high standard of literacy. It is extremely difficult to estimate degrees and standards of literacy for whole populations, but the probability is that Rae is not correct.

The second difficulty concerns the reasoning of Rae's argument, and we shall discuss this in more detail. Repeatedly in his article, he associates 'grammar' (the substance of type 1 complaints) with effective writing (cf. Orwell and type 2 complaints). 'For nearly two decades', he states, '*formal grammar and the accurate use of language* have been anathema to most teachers of English in schools' (our italics). We would certainly agree that effective teaching of descriptive grammar should return to the curriculum, but if there is any relation between grammar teaching and skill in

writing, it could well be an indirect one. The teaching of grammar *may* encourage a respect for precision and care, and it lays an essential basis for the teaching of foreign languages, but it has never been demonstrated that it is the main element in teaching effective writing skills. If, however, Rae does not mean 'grammar' at all but 'correct usage', that is another matter. Written English differs from spoken English, and there are perfectly grammatical spoken sequences that are simply not acceptable in writing (see Chapter 4). Handbooks such as that of Gowers (1954), as recommended by Rae, are excellent aids to good writing, but they are not books of 'grammar'.

The point is that Rae's argument is confused. Good writing will not necessarily follow on the heels of grammar teaching; furthermore, it is not clear whether Rae means 'grammar' or 'correct written usage'. If he means the latter, there are further implications, to which we now turn.

As we have seen, prescriptive notions of correctness tend in practice to be rather narrow and seemingly intolerant (in the next chapter, we shall see that prescriptions appropriate to the written channel are often uncritically applied to spoken usage). If, as Rae correctly argues, all children (including working-class children) should have equal access in principle to standard written English, it is important that the differences between speech and writing should be clearly pointed out and that spoken forms should not be devalued (cf. the views of Orwell).

Yet, underlying these apparently simple recommendations, there is a huge problem that is of a social or sociolinguistic kind rather than narrowly linguistic. Language use is embedded in a social matrix, and, as we suggested in 1.2, privately held attitudes to language are not necessarily identical with those publicly expressed by the guardians of the complaint tradition. Sociolinguists have shown that many close-knit communities place a higher value on oral skills than on written ones (Labov, 1972b; L. Milroy, 1980); we shall discuss in Chapter 3 the community pressures that tend to maintain these values and also maintain the forms of non-standard English (symbolising community identities). Children who want 'to get on' (as Rae puts it) may face a considerable dilemma, as 'getting on' may involve distancing from family and friends, or, as we have elsewhere described it (L. Milroy, 1980: 194-8), opting for *status* and rejecting *solidarity*. We shall not get far in English teaching if these problems and their effects on language use are not initially

recognised. Failure to address them will merely maintain the *status quo*.

2.6 Conclusions

In this section we shall briefly summarise the main points that arise from this chapter.

We have continued to argue that standardisation is a process that is always present in the development of a major language, and that it is promoted through various channels. The standard ideology encourages prescription in language, dedicated to the principle that there must be one, and only one, correct way of using a linguistic item (at the level of pronunciation, spelling, grammar and, to a great extent, meaning). Attempts to prescribe standard usage in spoken language are never wholly successful, and quite unsuccessful at the level of pronunciation and grammar: however, the prescriptive tradition has succeeded in bringing about broad consensus on the norms of written language.

The first type of complaint tradition is dedicated to keeping the standard ideology alive, and is based on the assumption that the resources of standard English are inherently superior to those of other dialects. This is not necessarily the case. The reason for promoting one unitary dialect above the others is the desirability of uniformity. If usage is uniform, communication is more efficient and miscomprehension less likely. However, as we have noted, this tradition has not been noticeably successful in reducing variability in speech (as against writing).

The second type of complaint is not primarily concerned with non-standard usage, but with observed abuses in public and formal language, usually written, and always standardised in its basic structure. This type of criticism assumes that a standard literary language already exists and the function of the tradition is to promote clarity of usage and careful thinking about choice of words. Its recommendations are clearly relevant to an education in literacy. As we shall see in Chapter 3, fluency in written language requires different types of skills from fluency in speech, and careful training is needed. It is important also that a population should be capable of being critical and perceptive about public use of language on the part of politicians and others: Orwell was clearly concerned about this. We would suggest that the linguistic criticism

of this tradition is infinitely more important for our educational system than are the more arid and pedantic aspects of grammatical 'correctness' as promoted by the first type of complaint. So too are the well informed and carefully reasoned arguments of linguists such as Stubbs (1983b) and Sinclair (1982).

Public discussion of the 'Standard English' issue in schools has been less reflective and less well informed about language than it ought to be. The distinctions between language system and language use, and between speech and writing, have seldom been adequately emphasised, and there has been confusion between 'grammatical correctness' and 'effective writing'. The arguments of language scholars such as Stubbs and Sinclair are not usually acknowledged in these public discussions: they are not publicised in the press, as the views of Rae (1982) and Honey (1983) are. The educational importance of these matters, however, is such that a higher level of public debate is essential. This is further discussed in Chapter 5 and elsewhere in this book.