This study is about the English language as it is spoken and written in the United States. Nevertheless, the linguistic principles which provide groundwork for the discussion are not limited to English. Instead, they are generalizations about all human language, and they need to be understood before we proceed. There are some obstacles to laying out these ideas, however, and some ironies which bear consideration.

Linguists do not form a homogenous club. Like any other group of scholars divided by a common subject matter, there are great rivalries, ancient quarrels, picky arguments, and plain differences of opinion. It could hardly be otherwise in a discipline diverse enough to include topics such as neurological structures and linguistic capacity, grammaticalized strategies for encoding social information in systems of address, and creolization. Thus it should be no surprise that those who study the rules which generate the ordering of words into sentences (syntacticians and cognitive grammarians, for example) are often openly disdainful of each other’s approach, on theoretical grounds, and of the study of the social life of language, more generally. Linguists concerned with the relationship between structured variation in language and social identity (sociolinguists, variationists, some anthropological linguists) chide both syntacticians and cognitive grammarians for what they see as unreasonable abstractions and lack of reproducible results; phoneticians go about their business of understanding and theorizing the way humans produce and perceive sound – the architects and engineers of linguistics – and wonder what all the noise is about; historical linguists concern themselves with the written data of lost language communities and write complex formulas for the reconstruction of sounds that might have been heard around the early Roman explorations of central Europe, or in more extreme cases, when the first people wandered from Asia to the North American land mass.
However, there is a great deal that linguists do agree about, in simply factual terms. For example, the statement *All living languages change* is one that no linguist would counter, unless they were to ask for a definition of “living” and to debate the parameters and implications of that term, just for the fun of it. And, of course, not all linguists find the fact that all living languages change to be equally interesting or worthy of study. Nonetheless, that statement is part of the core of knowledge about language, hard won, with which all linguists begin.

It is also true that the very subject of this book — how people think about language, how and why they try to control it, to what social ends, and with what linguistic and social repercussions — has often been put aside as uninteresting by linguists themselves. Traditionally, linguists draw a strict line in the sand between what they hope is their own objective description of language phenomena and subjective, usually prescriptive, limits on language by misinformed or underinformed lay persons (language “mavens” or “shamans”). More recently, however, some linguists have put aside this strict division in recognition of the fact that how people think about language is in fact relevant to the study of language as a social construct, and that claims of objectivity on the part of linguists are sometimes suspiciously self-protective. Deborah Cameron points out, for example, that the descriptive/prescriptive line used by linguists to validate their own pursuit of knowledge about language and devalue or dismiss other types of discourses about language can be challenged:

> the overt anti-prescriptive stance of linguists is in some respects not unlike the prescriptivism they criticize. The point is that both prescriptivism and anti-prescriptivism invoke certain norms and circulate particular notions about how language ought to work. Of course, the norms are different (and in the case of linguistics, they are often covert). But both sets feed into the more general arguments that influence everyday ideas about language. On that level, “description” and “prescription” turn out to be aspects of a single (and normative) activity: a struggle to control language by defining its nature.

(1995: 8)

Cameron’s observations are accurate on many levels: the struggle between linguists and non-linguists are often about authority. The issues she raises are relevant ones for sociolinguists and other linguists interested in the relationship between power and language to think about, but she is not the first to raise them. An extreme representation might be that prescriptivists claim the right to tell people how to talk, and that linguists claim the right to tell prescriptivists what not to say.

There is a qualitative difference between the two approaches, however. The linguist and the non-linguist claim different kinds and sources of authority to validate their individual approaches to language. Linguists are often impatient when they are cornered at cocktail parties and asked to debate language issues which they brook no debate, just as geologists and biologists would be hard-pressed to debate (with any degree of seriousness or interest) arguments against evolutionary theory based on the writings of the Bible. Linguists claim some authority in the description of language based on observation, experimentation, and deduction, so that the claim *All living languages change* is not a matter of faith or opinion or aesthetics, but observable fact (which is not to say that all claims by linguists are equally supportable by fact).

The rest of this chapter is an attempt to pull together some statements about language which enjoy widespread support of the majority (but probably not all) linguists and which are demonstrably true, in as much as anything can be demonstrated as consistently true for any social behavior: that is, the nature of linguistic argumentation is probabilistic and not predictive.

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

This phenomenon has been observed widely. In *The Language Instinct: How the mind creates language*, Steven Pinker notes to his readers:

> Most educated people already have opinions about language. They know that it is man’s most important cultural invention, the quintessential example of his capacity to use symbols, and a biologically unprecedented event irrevocably separating him from other animals. They know that language pervades thought, with different languages causing their speakers to construe reality in different ways. They know that children learn to talk from role models and caregivers. They know that grammatical sophistication used to be nurtured in the schools, but sagging educational standards and the debasements of popular culture have led to a frightening decline in the ability of the average person to construct a... grammatical sentence. They also know that English is a zany, logic-defying tongue. ... In the pages that follow, I will try to convince you that every one of these common opinions is wrong!

(1994: 17–18)

My purpose in this book is somewhat less comprehensive than Pinker’s: I will concern myself primarily with the part of common beliefs about language which concern attitudes towards language variation, and the personal and institutionalized behaviors resulting from these beliefs. Moreover, I will outline only those *linguistic facts of life* which are essential to the arguments which follow in the remainder of this book.
The linguistic facts of life which are of central concern to the issues in this book are the following:

- All spoken language changes over time.
- All spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms.
- Grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and independent issues.
- Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally, and functionally fundamentally different creatures.
- Variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level.

**ALL SPOKEN LANGUAGE CHANGES OVER TIME**

All language changes over time, in terms of lexicon, sound structures, tone, rhythm, the way sentences are put together, the social markings of variants, and the meanings assigned to words. Only unused, dead languages are static. This is true in Great Britain as it is on the North American continent, as it is for every other spoken language in the world.

Even the most conservative of language observers cannot argue that Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, Woolf, Wharton, and Morrison (to take us from the fourteenth to the twentieth century), some of the men and women who wrote what is commonly regarded as the great literature of the English-speaking world, wrote the same English. From there it follows that they did not *speak* the same English. It is not conceivable that anyone would care to argue that because Toni Morrison does not write or talk like Shakespeare did that her English is bad, less efficient, less capable of carrying out the functions for which it is needed. Table 1.1 provides examples which demonstrate how written language changes over time.

Language changes whether we like it or not. Attempts to stop spoken language from changing are not unknown in the history of the world, but they are universally without success, unless they are instituted by means of genocide. Sometimes languages die a less sudden death, for example when the community of speakers who use them disperse, succumb to plague, or otherwise are forcibly assimilated into dominating cultures (as in the case of most of the languages indigenous to this continent); languages are born, for example through the processes of pidginization and subsequent creolization.

Language standardization, which is in some ways an attempt to stop language change, or at least to fossilize language by means of controlling variation, will be considered in more depth in the next chapters. That discussion will be part of a more in-depth consideration of the ideological structures which make such a process seem good and necessary.

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**Table 1.1 The English language changing over time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1480</td>
<td>As it is known how many manner of peple ben in the jlonde ther ben also so many langages and tonges ... (William Caxton, <em>Of the languages of maners &amp; Vsage of the people of Y' Londe</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1596</td>
<td>I doe not weel know, but by ghesse, what you doe meane by these termes ... therefore I pray you explaine them. (Edmund Spenser, <em>A View of the State of Ireland</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Custome is the most certaine Mistressse of Language, as the publike stompe makes the current money. (Ben Jonson, <em>Timber or Discoveries</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740</td>
<td>The Opportunities we have lost for propagating our Language on the Continent, are more to be lamented, since perhaps the same, or so great, may never again be offer'd ... how easily might we have made the Frenchmen eat their own Words, and obliged them to speak plain English. (M. Briton, &quot;An apology for the English language,&quot; <em>London Magazine</em>. Quoted also in Bailey 1991: 99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>Man have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing. (Jane Austen, <em>Persuasion</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>His voice was clear and ringing, not Scots, full of what Roland might inaccurately have called toffee-nosed sounds, or plummy sounds, sounds he had spent his childhood learning to imitate derisorily, hooting, curtailed, drawling, chipping sounds that pricked his non-existent hackles with class hostility. (A. S. Byatt, <em>Possession</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ALL SPOKEN LANGUAGES ARE EQUAL IN LINGUISTIC TERMS**

All spoken languages are equally capable of expressing a full range of ideas and experiences, and of developing to meet new needs as they arise. This claim by linguists is usually countered by non-linguists with examples of languages which reportedly have no terms for snow, or for which a vocabulary to discuss nuclear fusion does not exist. *Try talking about the Geneva Convention’s guidelines on chemical weapons in Arawakan, this argument goes, and see if English or French or Chinese are not more capable of carrying the discussion.* The fact is, however, that English has not always had the vocabulary necessary to talk about chemical weapons, or aeronautical engineering, or genetic mapping — just as speakers of Germanic languages in central Europe once had no terms with which to discuss Christian theology. Language is an incredibly flexible and responsive social tool; we make or borrow what we don’t have. In this flexibility
and ability to change and adapt when necessity or will arises, all languages are equal. If through a sudden and unexpected shift in the world’s economy the Arawakan speakers of Peru suddenly were sole possessors of some resource everyone else needed, then Arawakan would develop a variety of new vocabularies and grammatical strategies to deal with new challenges.

Languages are similar and different from one another in many ways beyond matters of vocabulary, however. Nevertheless, it is not a useful exercise to compare Swahili to Tagalog in order to find out which one is the “better” or “more efficient” language: these are not cars. We cannot compare manufacturing costs, gas mileage, performance on rough terrain. Each language is suited to its community of speakers; each language changes in pace as that community and the demands of the speakers evolve. This applies not just to languages which are unrelated to one another, but also to varieties of a single language. Cockney and the dialect of Chicago, or African American Vernacular English and the dialect of Smith’s Island in Chesapeake Bay, while very different varieties of English in many ways, are all equally efficient as languages, although they do not enjoy the same degree of wider social acceptance.

If efficiency and clarity in communication are an ultimate goal in language use (an idea which will be considered below), then a non-linguist might argue that English is neither efficient nor clear in terms of its pronouns, as a speaker cannot make clear, in purely grammatical terms, if she is addressing her comments to one speaker or more (“Would you like to have dinner with me?”); further, this statement is completely without any indication of the social relationship between the speaker and the person she wants to have dinner with. Other languages are not so lax: most of the Germanic and Romance languages, as well as the Slavic and many Asian languages, distinguish between singular and plural personal pronouns, and many languages also have a complex system of honorifics which requires that speakers situate themselves in social space in relationship to the person addressed.

Another example of a lack of grammatical complexity in English has to do with the issue of verb mood. If asked why George is not in class, his classmates may answer “He’s working.” If George’s classmates are trying to be helpful to him, they may say this in a way which passes on no additional information about the truth value of the statement. In some spoken varieties of German, however, they have no choice but to take a stance on their report. In Alemannic (the spoken varieties of German used in eastern Switzerland, western Austria and some parts of southwestern Germany) there are three possibilities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ar ischt am schaffa</th>
<th>indicative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ar sii am schaffa</td>
<td>present subjunctive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ar wär am schaffa</td>
<td>past subjunctive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first case, use of the indicative mood indicates that the speaker believes the report he or she is passing on to be factually true. Using the present subjunctive, however, indicates that the report is being passed on neutrally. A good, idiomatic translation of this would be “I am told he is working: I do not know if this is true or not true.” The third option, however, says very clearly that the speaker is passing on the report but does not believe it. Thus, Alemannic speakers, when asked to report something said by another speaker, must take a stance on the truth value of what they are reporting.

It is a credit to the power of language prescriptivists that many native speakers of English will look at this example and say, well yes, now that you mention it – in this particular instance, English is less effective or systematic than Alemannic.

But let’s consider some facts. First, a language which does not have an overt strategy for dealing with a grammatical or semantic distinction will have other ways of doing just that. We cannot claim that English speakers are incapable of making themselves clear on just who it is they are inviting to dinner, or what they believe about the reports they pass on. Social and regional varieties of English have developed a multitude of strategies for dealing with the singular/plural distinction. For example, in Belfast and some parts of the US you and yous; in the midwest and some parts of the far west you and yous; in much of the southern US you and you’uns or y’al’l; in parts of Pennsylvania you and yous. Intonation and lexical choice will make it clear whether or not the speaker believes George is actually working, or just cutting class. An additional strategy employed by all speakers of English would involve a range of lexical choices which might not engender negative social reactions, but which show strategic maneuvering: “Would you folks/people/chaps/fellows/kids like to . . .?”

It is true that these examples all come from regionally restricted “dialects” of English, not “standard” English (with the possible exception of some of the lexical strategies in the last example). Could we then claim that supra-regional or standardized English – bound by adherence to a sometimes inflexible grammar – is not as efficient as the social and regional dialects? This is a tempting argument, but it cannot survive close examination.

All language, even standardized and idealized language, will cope with ambiguity of all kinds. If socially motivated rules forbid reliance on certain grammatical strategies or lexical terms, then discourse, intonation, and body-language strategies can be called into play:

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

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

GRAMMATICALITY AND COMMUNICATIVE EFFECTIVENESS ARE DISTINCT AND INDEPENDENT ISSUES

There are two interrelated concepts which must be distinguished: first, what constitutes the rules of a grammar, and the violation of those rules; and second, the lack of relationship between some kinds of grammaticality and the inherent value, content, and purpose of the message contained in the utterance. The first issue, grammaticality, has been discussed widely, but will be outlined here briefly. Evaluation of language content is brought up in this context less often, but because the two issues are so often confused in public discourse, this subject will be explored.

Grammaticality

Linguists use the term grammatical to refer to any utterance which could occur in a given language. In terms of linguistic grammaticality, the following are perfectly functional utterances in English:

Danny gone - he be working down to the factory.

Ain't no way he's gonna.

He said he may can have these by the first of the month (Feagin 1979: 335).

Between you and I, he's wrong.

Coffee I can always drink, so pour me.

Meat's so expensive anymore that we eat a lot of macaroni.

Down the shore everything's all right.

Those boots sure are fly (Morgan and DeBerry 1995: 12).

If you're going out, I'm coming with.

Mrs. Vincent took a heart attack.

So she goes, like, no, it's way late for that.

The data shows that the hypothesis can't be supported.

To non-linguists, the “mistakes” in these sentences would be more or less obvious, with the possible exception of the last two examples. In those cases, academics especially would argue that the noun data must be used as a plural, with a plural verb; particularly hard-line prescriptivists would be sure to point out that things are put into a pocket.

Linguists and non-linguists both see grammar as a set of rules which must be obeyed, but they differ on the nature and origination of those rules. When linguists talk about grammar, they are conceptualizing the internalized, rule-driven structure of a language which facilitates the generation of all possible sentences for that particular language, and at the same time, rules out sentences like *lizard the leaped, for English. (There are no varieties of English which allow a definite article to be placed after the noun to which it belongs, although Swedish, another Germanic language, does this as a matter of course.) For non-linguists, grammar rules are usually socially constructed, having more in common with norms that forbid men to wear skirts in public or people to eat mashed potatoes with their fingers in restaurants. Pinker (1995) uses the example of a taxicab to illustrate this distinction, and as it is a useful illustration I have adapted it here:

The Taxicab Maxim

A taxicab must obey the laws of physics, but it can flout the laws of the state of Michigan (or Florida, or London, etc.).

Thus it is never necessary to remind a child about language-internal, rule-governed grammaticality (*Susie! Stop putting your articles after your nouns!), but it may seem very necessary, in social terms, to stop that same child from announcing “I gotta pee” during religious services, or for saying “I ain’t got none” if she is asked about her brothers and sisters by a stranger; although these two instances invite correction for different reasons, none of those reasons have to do with linguistic grammaticality. Both “I gotta pee” and “I ain’t got none” are completely viable, for English. Social conventions around language, however, are less tolerant. In terms of language, as for social behaviors like dress and eating behaviors, there are complex histories and rationalizations underlying each point of authority, and mechanisms for enforcing them which are quite effective. Thus it is useful to make a distinction between linguistic grammaticality and socially constructed grammaticality.

Danny gone - he be working down to the factory is linguistically grammatical because it follows from the rule-governed structure of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), known also as Black English or Black English Vernacular (BEV). AAVE has complex morphosyntactic rules which contrast with those for other varieties of US English in many ways. So for example we see in this sentence a grammatical distinction in the conjugation of the verb “to be” in Danny gone and he be working. In the first case, AAVE allows deletion of the copula where other varieties of US English allow contraction (“Danny's gone”). In the case of he be working, AAVE provides a grammatical strategy to distinguish between durative and non-durative action: Danny working down to the factory means that he is there right now; Danny be working down to the factory means he goes there daily, that this is an on-going, repetitive action.
A non-linguist would very likely call Danny gone – he be working down to the factory ungrammatical because it violates subject–verb agreement rules which are functional in other varieties of English. The question then becomes: is there only one valid variety of English, with one set of morphological rules, and can all spoken language varieties be held to that single set of rules?

That is a question for the later chapters in this book. For the moment, it is enough to note that linguists reserve the term ungrammatical for those constructions or usages which do not occur in the language at all, and cannot be generated from its grammar.

Content

I have put forth as facts that any language is capable of adapting to any linguistic need, and that every native speaker produces utterances which are by their very nature grammatical. What I have not and cannot claim, is that message content can be judged in the same way. This is where the potential of the language and the grammar as abstractions come into conflict with language as it is used by individuals. Linguists differentiate between language system and language use, which may be loosely interpreted as the acknowledgement that each utterance, while grammatical, may or may not fulfill the purpose for which it was conceived and formulated, for a wide variety of reasons. Consider the following hypothetical responses (B1–B5) to a simple question (A):

A: “Can I have your phone number?”
B1: “I’ll have a beer.”
B2: “Uh, well, I’m not sure – what is my phone number, it’s – ah – I don’t –”
B3: “What’s a phone, and why does it have a number?”
B4: “When hell freezes over.”
B5: “It’s 555-3333.”

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

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

Is it persuasive?
Is its delivery pleasing?

The five possible responses provided for the question Can I have your phone number? could be judged on the basis of clarity, logic, conciseness, persuasiveness, and delivery, but not until we have more information, because the communicative intent of both the question posed and the answer received are multidimensional. It is possible to imagine many underlying purposes to the question Can I have your phone number? depending on the context in which it is asked, and the relationship of speaker to listener. In one possible situation (in which one person is trying to establish a romantic or sexual relationship), the answer “Uh, well, I’m not sure – what is my phone number, it’s – ah – I don’t –” may not be concise (in the sense of “succinct”), but the underlying message is, after all, a complex one: I have evaluated you as a potential mate and found that you are not acceptable, but I have no wish to insult you directly or embarrass you, and in fact I am afraid of the social consequences of doing so. Within its social context, the reply is very clear, and it is also concise in that it gets its message across with fewer lexical items than the alternate proposed. Alternatively “When hell freezes over” is a longer answer than “No” but it is also much more descriptive. A simple negation leaves room for interpretation of motive; “When hell freezes over” leaves very little doubt about the evaluation of the question.

In the medieval and early modern periods, liberal arts consisted in part of the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the trivium), where rhetoric is taken to mean language used effectively and persuasively. This concern with “effective” language persists, although the term remains, as always, a subjective one.11 If effectiveness in language is the sum of more specific qualifiers (clarity, logic, conciseness, persuasiveness, and delivery), then calculation of effectiveness is complicated by the fact that these are subjective rather than objective measures. Whether or not these are reasonable demands of language as a vehicle of communication is also debatable.12 Is language more effective when sentences are short, or long? When it is spoken fast, or slow? When the vocabulary used is primarily Germanic (help!), or Romance (assistance!)?

I will argue at various points in this study that the evaluation of language effectiveness – while sometimes quite relevant – is often a covert way of judging not the delivery of the message, but the social identity of the messenger. It is a basic truth about language that the variety of the language spoken cannot predict the effectiveness of the message.

It is not hard to get people to acknowledge that an individual who speaks a variety of English which is highly evaluated in social terms is not necessarily a good speaker, or that a socially “right” variety of English does not automatically bring with it the ability to write well. The National Council of Teachers of English put out a publication called Quarterly
Prince Charles often demonstrates this tendency in public speeches, as we see in the following example given when he was judging a reading competition:

If English is spoken in heaven . . . God undoubtedly employs Cranmer as his speechwriter. The angels of the lesser ministries probably use the language of the New English Bible and the Alternative Service Book for internal memos.

(Tytl 1989: 1)

I suppose we must be fair and point out that the Prince of Wales does not automatically assume that English is spoken in heaven. Nevertheless, his further assumptions are quite interesting. It is useful to point out first that those language authorities cited here as perfect all draw their power from religious institutions. Thomas Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury (the head of the Anglican Church) under Henry VIII, and he is cited by the Prince of Wales as an authority because he simplified and translated the Latin prayer books into one English volume, the Book of Common Prayer, which eventually became the only book used, by means of England’s Act of Uniformity (1662). It is also interesting that the written documents which are cited here as appropriate models for the spoken language are British ones (in other places, Prince Charles has been very critical of what has been done to English by its speakers on the North American continent). But most important to the discussion immediately at hand is the way this picture of language perfection assumes that the various mediums of language are one and the same. Here we see mention of spoken language, speeches (which can be given as planned but extemporaneous speech, or the reading out loud of written language), and written language.

This proclamation by the future king of England also builds on a tradition of drawing on divine authority in language which goes back to Socrates, who in writing about the self-sufficiency and perfection of classical Greek makes the argument that it is the language “in which the Gods must clearly be supposed to call things by their right and natural names” (Plato 1970: 138). More recently, in an event which has been quoted so widely as to have passed into linguistic legend, a congressman in Texas (or, in some accounts, Oklahoma) is said to have expressed the decisive argument against bilingual education (and unwittingly, for more and better history and geography instruction) by drawing on the ultimate authority: “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ,” he intoned, “then it’s good enough for the schoolchildren of Texas.”

The issue of rightful authority in determining standards for language obscures one primary issue: written and spoken language lend themselves differently to standardization. Why should this be? Halliday points out that “writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing the same things; rather, they are ways of doing different things” (1989: xv). Before we examine what it is that they do differently, an overview of the major

**WRITTEN LANGUAGE AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE ARE HISTORICALLY, STRUCTURALLY, AND FUNCTIONALLY FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT CREATURES**

This point is easy enough to bolster with factual evidence, but it is perhaps the single most difficult point for non-linguists to fully understand and accept. In our minds the spoken and written languages are so intertwined that we seem sometimes incapable of distinguishing between them.

Review of Doublespeak which is dedicated to documenting how spoken and written language are used to obscure poor reasoning and to deliberately mislead. The persons who are quoted in these pages are speakers of what would be called an educated, mainstream US English, for example the following transcript of Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun:

Today’s majority . . . decides that the forced repatriation of the Haitian refugees is perfectly legal, because the word “return” does not mean return, because the opposite of “within the United States” is not outside the United States, and because the official charged with controlling immigration has no role in enforcing an order to control immigration.

(Justice Harry Blackmun, The Progressive, August 1993: 10, as cited in Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, October 1993: 2-3)

Political debate provides daily examples of highly educated and powerful people who speak what is generally considered “the best” English, who are still incapable of expressing simple ideas clearly, at least in a public forum. When former Vice President Dan Quayle stated with great confidence: “I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy – but that could change” (Slansky and Radlauer 1992: 41) many people shook their heads at his doublespeak, but no one called his English ungrammatical. When the media drew attention to Quayle’s language use it was not because of the kind of English he speaks, but more usually because of his lack of logic, poor information, malapropisms, or on one highly publicized occasion, his inability to spell.¹³

Of course, there are many speakers of what would generally be called Standard US English who also are capable of expressing their thoughts clearly and concisely, both in speech and writing. But can effective messages be given in AAVE? In Appalachian English, or Chicano English? What happens when the message comes in a variety of English which is not highly evaluated in social terms?

In the course of this book, I will argue that the statement the variety of the language spoken cannot predict the effectiveness of the message, while true, is only a partial truth. The variety of the language spoken cannot predict the effectiveness of the message, but it can predict some of the social evaluation the listener brings to the message, and his or her willingness to listen.

This proclamation by the future king of England also builds on a tradition of drawing on divine authority in language which goes back to Thomas Cranmer, who also are capable of expressing their thoughts clearly and concisely, both in speech and writing. But can effective messages be given in AAVE? In Appalachian English, or Chicano English? What happens when the message comes in a variety of English which is not highly evaluated in social terms?

In the course of this book, I will argue that the statement the variety of the language spoken cannot predict the effectiveness of the message, while true, is only a partial truth. The variety of the language spoken cannot predict the effectiveness of the message, but it can predict some of the social evaluation the listener brings to the message, and his or her willingness to listen.
differences between the two language channels will be useful, as seen in Box 1.1:

Box 1.2  A comparison of written and spoken language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken language ...</th>
<th>Written language ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is an innate human capacity which is acquired by all human children who are not isolated from other language users during the critical acquisition period</td>
<td>is not universal, and must be consciously and rigorously taught; it is a skill which will be acquired with differing degrees of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draws heavily on paralinguistic features to convey information in more than one way: tone of voice, body language</td>
<td>cannot rely on these resources and must use punctuation, additional lexical items or constructions when written letters alone do not suffice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is primarily a social activity, carried out between two or more persons</td>
<td>is carried out as a solitary pursuit, with an audience removed in time and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allows confusion and ambiguity to be resolved directly by repair and confirmation procedures</td>
<td>does not allow confusion and ambiguity to be immediately resolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is used in a social and temporal context, and thus brings with it a great deal of background information; draws on context to complement meaning and fill in ellipses</td>
<td>is contextless and thus more prone to ambiguity; intolerant of ellipses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be planned or spontaneous</td>
<td>is by nature planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is ephemeral</td>
<td>is permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is inherently and unavoidably variable on every level, language internally (structurally) and externally (socially); exploits variation to pass on information in addition to that of the surface message</td>
<td>actively suppresses and discourages variation of all kinds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While written and spoken language seem on the surface to be very similar, a comparison of one with the other soon demonstrates how different they are. Why should this be the case?
22 Linguistics, language, and ideology

shows an unusually early awareness of the function of apostrophes to mark possessive s. The final sentence is actually in four distinct thoughts, joined by the conjunction and, as is common in spoken language. There is only one subordinate clause.

The second example was written barely six months later when Robert was in third grade, and it demonstrates that he has learned how to divide language into the chunks which are expected of a written description. He uses commas to set off dependent clauses.

In the final example, written late in the third-grade school year, Robert has mastered many narrative techniques unique to the written language: at last, when night fell, and there he saw are the type of construction rarely heard in spontaneous oral discourse. Robert has learned to use exclamation points when in an oral narrative he might raise an arm or his voice to signal a high point in the story. He begins a new paragraph to signal a pause or change of direction in the narration.

The transition from spoken to written language is the acquisition of a skill; it is, in broad terms, learning to plan an otherwise spontaneous activity with extreme attention to detail. Generally, all language can be divided into two rough categories, planned and unplanned, but writing predominates on the planned side, and the spoken language is usually unplanned. For the most part planned speech occurs in particularly formal or stylized contexts, for example, a traditional marriage proposal or a presentation before a bank’s board of directors. In this case, spoken language often shows traces of syntactical constructions or lexical items normally reserved for the written language.

While writing is planned language, most speech is unplanned, and fulfills a wide range of possible functions. Many (or, some linguists would claim, all) of these are communicative in nature. There are distinct functions, which in the Jakobsonian model include:

1. The pragmatic functions, in which commands or requests are made, things are sold, or warnings are issued. Newspaper! Get your newspaper! Put it here! or Your hair is on fire! are all examples of speech functioning in a pragmatic way.

2. Emotional components, which serve to express an internal state on the part of the speaker or instill an emotional state on the part of the decoder, as in I could just spit!

3. Cognitive aspects, in which the use of speech is to convey information associated with thought, theory, data, or other facts. This subsumes the explanation of procedures and the expression of opinion, such as I like it like that, or Giraffes have longer necks than turtles.

4. Speech as a tool to establish, maintain, and reaffirm social roles within an organized society. Salutations (Hey! Look who the cat dragged in! How are you today? Girlfriend! Good afternoon, gentlemen) which seem to be pragmatic or cognitive are often in fact primarily social.

While the pragmatic, emotional, cognitive and social functions of speech can and do co-occur in single utterances, sociolinguists seem to agree that no matter how strictly pragmatic or cognitive, the majority of utterances have some element of the social in them. The social life of language often exists in subtle shifts and choices below the level of consciousness, in the way our vowels and consonants are pronounced and in the intonational patterns we use. Newspaper! Get your newspaper! is not the same utterance in Portland, New Orleans, Iowa City, San Diego, or Missoula, because it is not the same person calling out this very pragmatic message.

So what is the confusion between spoken and written language? It seems straightforward enough: we write things that tax our ability to remember, or to project our thoughts through space. We speak everything else. But aren’t they the same thing, just as water is water whether it flows, or freezes so that we can walk on it? Isn’t it just a matter of presentation? Can’t speech and writing be treated as different manifestations of the same mental phenomenon? Wouldn’t spoken language be more efficient if we treated it like written language?

We might think of the difference between spoken and written language as the difference between walking and machines built for the purpose of transporting human beings. Unless a child suffers a terrible turn of fate, he or she will learn to walk without focused instruction. People move themselves over space to pursue food and shelter, to associate with each other, and to explore their world. Over time, the human race developed a series of technologies to improve the ability to move themselves: they tamed horses, camels, oxen; they built carts, carriages, boats, trains, bicycles, cars, airplanes. All of these things are faster than walking, and, if speed is the primary criterion by which we judge efficiency of movement, they are superior to the skill all humans have in common. But it would not occur to us to set up standards for walking on the basis of the speed of any of these vehicles: it is a physical impossibility to walk 60 miles an hour for any amount of time. We cannot walk like we ride.

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

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

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

The preoccupation of the schools with the written language to the exclusion of the spoken is quite easy to document. The National Council of Teachers of English, for example, publishes guidelines for the curriculum in English on a regular basis; of the twelve points addressed, only three include mention of spoken language skills, and then in a very vague and indirect way (a topic which will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 6). From the spoken to the written language is a large step; it is another significant step from the written language to the possession of the spoken. The possession of the spoken is quite easy to document. The National Council of Teachers of English, for example, publishes guidelines for the curriculum in English on a regular basis; of the twelve points addressed, only three include mention of spoken language skills, and then in a very vague and indirect way (a topic which will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 6).

However, the possession of a skill, and facility to use that skill to construct a product, are cultural resources not equally available to all persons, and are heavily endowed with social currencies. Generally, the public does not consider oral cultures as equal to literate ones, and there has been scholarly work in linguistics and education which would seem to provide evidence for the inherent validity of this position. Some scholars have argued, with differing degrees of subtlety, that certain kinds or modes of thought cannot develop in oral cultures, and that for this reason literate cultures are superior. This type of argument has come under attack on both methodological and theoretical grounds. Most relevant here is Bernstein’s theory of restricted and elaborated codes, which attempted (and failed) to establish that children who spoke “elaborated” languages at home (those more syntactically complex) were more capable of logical thought (among other cognitive advantages) and that children who heard only “restricted” codes in the home were at a disadvantage. While Bernstein never made explicit the connection between languages of oral cultures and “restricted” codes, or languages of literate cultures and “elaborated” codes, this reading of his work is not an unusual one. Gordon (1981) provides an excellent review of Bernstein’s work and the literature.

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

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

Gee (1990) goes a step farther when he outlines the complex associations and expectations of literacy:

literacy is claimed to lead to logical, analytic, critical and rational thinking, general and abstract uses of language, a skeptical and questioning attitude, a distinction between myth and history, the recognition of the importance of time and space, complex and modern governments . . . political democracy and greater social equity, economic development, wealth and productivity, political stability, urbanization, and contraception (a lower birth rate). It is also supposed to lead to people who are innovative, achievement oriented, productive, cosmopolitan, media and politically aware . . . with more liberal and humane social attitudes, less likely to commit a crime, and more likely to take education, and the rights and duties of citizenship, seriously. The common popular and scholarly conception that literacy has such powerful effects as these constitutes what Harvey Graff has called the “literacy myth.”

What is of interest in this study is the force of a literacy myth (Graff 1987a, b) which has brought about the subordination of the spoken language to norms – in themselves sometimes arbitrary, and with differing degrees of effectiveness – which were developed for the written language. This process is part of what Foucault has called the disciplining of discourse, or the way we decide who has the right to talk, and to be listened to (1984, and elsewhere), the major topic of interest in the second and third parts of this book.

VARIATION IS INTRINSIC TO ALL SPOKEN LANGUAGE AT EVERY LEVEL

Spoken language varies for every speaker in terms of speech sounds, sound patterns, word and sentence structure, intonation, and meaning, from utterance to utterance. This is not a frivolous or useless feature of language. Quite the contrary: “Heterogeneity is an integral part of the linguistic economy of the community, necessary to satisfy the linguistic demands of everyday life” (Labov 1982a: 17). There are three sources of variation in language: first, language-internal pressures, arising in part from the mechanics of production and perception; second, language-external influences on language, as a social behavior subject to normative and other formative social pressures; and third, variation arising from language as a creative vehicle of free expression. These forces can and do function in tandem, and any good study of language change in progress will consider at least the first two together.

There is great similarity in the way we produce and perceive the sounds of language, because the human neurological and vocal apparatus used in speech is architecturally and structurally universal. As a child acquiring language, every person has potentially available to them the full range of
possible sounds. The sounds which will eventually survive and become part of the child’s language are arranged into language-specific systems, each sound standing in relation to the other sounds. In linguistic terms, the study of production and perception of speech sounds is the science of phonetics; concern with how sounds are organized into systems is called phonology. It is in the production and perception of speech sounds as systematic entities functioning in relationship to each other that there is perhaps the greatest potential for variation in language, and following from that, variation leading to change.

We begin with brief descriptions of some points of phonological or morpho-phonological variation currently active in all or parts of the US, as well as descriptions of two grammatical points and one stylistic point. If variation in language were “free” (a term often used in those branches of linguistics uninterested in the social life of language, where variation is seen as a kind of “noise in the channel”), then it would follow logically that the social structures of the communities in which the language functions could not predict any of the variation.

Phonological variation

The cot-caught merger

When two distinct, meaning-bearing sounds – vowels in this case – begin to merge, homonyms may result. For much of the midwestern US, for example, the words Mary, merry and marry are pronounced exactly the same. Currently, there is a great deal of activity in US English for the vowels in the words cot and caught, or hock and hawk, whereby the vowel of caught and hawk is being replaced by the vowel in cot and hock. For some readers of this book, this may be a meaningless statement because the merger will already be complete, and the whole process came and went without ever drawing attention to itself. For them, it must be pointed out that cot and caught are not the same word for everybody: some pronounce the first word with the sound [a] and the second with [ɔ]. (See Figure 1.1 for a schematic representation of these and other sounds.) This change is moving through the language lexical item by lexical item (which is only one way in which phonological change is realized). In my own speech, best termed “Midwest Northern Cities,” it has already come to pass for the words hot and solitary; it is variable for the words water and hog, but not yet active for the words fought, awkward, dawn, or horrible (although I have heard [a] used in those words by others, including my seven-year-old daughter). This is part of the large-scale vocalic system shift discussed at length in Labov (1991).

The short-forty and the park the car variables

For some varieties of US English the combination of [or] with a following consonant triggers variation between two possible realizations of the vowel, [ə] or [ɔ] (a low, back, slightly rounded vowel) in words such as short, forty, orchestra, and corporation with subsequent addition of an “off-glide” in monosyllables (Laferriere 1986). In a related set of phenomena, the sound (r) is often deleted after vowels, and sometimes inserted where none is expected.20 An example of this particular variation known to many is John Kennedy’s Boston variety of English; aware of the way his own accent was perceived by the public, he once noted that Bostonians “saved all the r’s paaking aa caas in Haavaad yaad [parking our cars in Harvard yard] in order to put them on the end of idear and Cuber [idea and Cuba].”

The walkin’ and talkin’ variable

English uses “ing” suffixes of verbs in a number of ways: as gerunds (Skiing is hard work), or in the progressive verbal construction (He’s playing games again). The suffix written with three letters has a number of possible realizations in speech: the one which is considered “proper” [in] does not actually have a “hard g sound”, or stop, at its end. The second most common realization is [in], often represented in writing as walkin’ and talkin’ as if a g had been deleted, when in fact one sound, [n], has been substituted for another, [ŋ]. There is in fact a third possible realization of this suffix as [ing], but it is limited in geographic and perhaps social ways.21
This variation is not active where -ing is part of the root of the word rather than a suffix: we do not find the variable pair ring [rin] and rin’ [rin].

The coupon variable

For a subset of lexical items with the sound [u] in a stressed syllable, there is at least a possibility of adding a “glide” or a y sound before that vowel, so that duke has two possible realizations: [duk] and [djuk] (“dyook”). This variation works below the level of consciousness, for the most part, with the exception of one lexical item: people do seem to be aware of the choice between coupon and c-y-coupon.

Grammatical variation

While variation in grammatical structure is quite salient, it is less often studied than phonological variation. Variations in verbal morphology are probably some of the most productive grammatical points of change in progress, and also the most complex.

Multiple negation

Generally in mainstream, non-stigmatized varieties of US and other Englishes, a single negative element is all that is allowed when we negate a sentence, although there are usually a number of possible strategies in negation available. In fact negation is a very complex business in any variety of English, and it is further complicated by prescriptivist, socially motivated grammatical rules which insist, for example, that two negatives make a positive, a piece of logic borrowed rather oddly – from mathematics. The fact that two negatives do not make a positive in a variety of other languages does not seem to shake the public’s firm commitment to this rule of thumb; nevertheless, mainstream varieties of spoken English do sometimes allow multiple negation of the sort found in Nobody much likes Harry, I don’t think. Further, if one person rages “No, no, no no no no!” it is not likely that his or her audience would then determine that the six “no’s” (a number divisible by two) render this a positive statement.

In other, stigmatized varieties of English, a single underlying negation may be realized at multiple points in an utterance: We ain’t never had no trouble about pulling out no knife (Wolfram 1969: 153).

In non-stigmatized US English the possible variants for this sentence include:

We never had any trouble about pulling out a knife.
We didn’t have any trouble about pulling out a knife.

None of us ever had any trouble about pulling out a knife.
Not one of us ever had any trouble about pulling out a knife.

Whether the variety of English in question allows multiple negation or not, there is a great deal of variation available in the process.

Invariant forms of “to be”

Another point of variation in verb usage is commonly called “subject–verb” agreement. For example, a standardized US English requires that the past tense of the verb “to be” distinguish between plural and singular; first, second, and third persons: I was, you (singular) were, he/she/it was, we were, you (plural) were, they were. There are, however, both social and regional dialects which tend toward what has been called “invariant was,” or the use of the singular form regardless of the subject, as in We was in an ideal place for it or Was you a majorette? (Feagin 1979: 204). This particular point of variation shows up more widely in conjunction with the impersonal subject there, as in There was twenty dollars in my purse when I last looked. This is true as well for the present tense, where the verb form is often contracted: There’s donuts left if you’re hungry or There’s stars out tonight.

Lexical variation

This is the kind of linguistic variation which people are most often aware of, and which causes heated discussion at cocktail parties. In southeastern Michigan, there are often good-natured classroom arguments on the use of pop (the variant most likely found farther west) versus soda (the variant found to the east); people seem to find discussions of the distribution of the roughly equal terms tennis shoe, gym shoe, sneaker quite interesting. Sociolinguists find this kind of variation less compelling, unless there is correlation to other points of variation which are more socially or geographically complex.

There are lexical items which function as discourse markers, however, and which are so complex in structural, social, and stylistic terms that linguists spend a lot of time worrying over them. Terms like you know, well, and but show us “how speakers and hearers jointly integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make overall sense out of what is said” (Schiffrin 1987: 49). A particularly interesting but not widely studied discourse marker is the use of like, as in the sentence Most of them like maybe like drink and stuff (California Style Collective 1993: 8). At first glance it would seem that this must be nothing more than a random and strictly age-graded phenomenon and devoid of any meaning, but first glances are often deceptive.
The examples of variation in language provided above might seem, at first glance, to be obvious and uninteresting in any real way. People say things different ways at different times, but the meaning of the utterance remains the same whether we are told that Republicans don’t like liberals or Ain’t no Republican likes no liberal.

But language isn’t simple, and variation isn’t without consequences. Human beings choose among thousands of points of variation available to them not because the human mind is sloppy, or language is imprecise: just the opposite. We exploit linguistic variation available to us in order to send a complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position ourselves in the world we live in. We perceive variation in the speech of others and we use it to structure our knowledge about that person. Listening to strangers calling into talk-radio programs, it is more than grammar and vowel sounds that we evaluate, more than the content of their comments that we walk away with. “What’s a Dago know about the price of oil?” my father asked once while listening to an anonymous caller to a talk-radio program rant about the gasoline crunch in the late 1970s. My father, a native speaker of Italian, recognized the caller as socially and ethnically similar to himself and made a series of evaluations. We all have experiences like this: it is part of speaking a language. The inability to use or recognize the social markings of linguistic variants is one of the most significant problems of second-language learners, and one that is rarely dealt with in the classroom, where the myth of standard terms, these are social, stylistic, geographic, or temporal, and in anyone case of active variation, more than one of these factors is probably at play, and works in complex ways with language-internal influences on variation.

The parameters of linguistic variation are multidimensional. In large-scale terms, these are social, stylistic, geographic, or temporal, and in any one case of active variation, more than one of these factors is probably at play, and works in complex ways with language-internal influences on variation.

Social parameters of linguistic variation can be approached a number of ways. There is a great deal of discussion among sociolinguists about the underlying conceptions of the language community and the methodologies for approaching and quantifying the community’s language. What is relevant here is not a history of the theory and methodology of sociolinguistic inquiry (that has been done elsewhere, and with great care; see for example Chambers 1995), but what generalizations are possible about the relationship between linguistic variation and social identity based on some thirty-five years of inquiry. We know, for example, that gender, age, and geographical loyalties are often coded by means of language variation. When we choose among variants available to us, we take those that will effectively mark us as belonging to specific social groupings. We do this sometimes even when we are trying not to (in the next chapters we will return to this very relevant subject of mutability of language).

Sociolinguistics becomes complicated as soon as we recognize that social identities only begin with questions of geography, gender, and age. In many years of studying the way structured variation in language reflects the social structures of the community, it has become clear that language can serve to mark a number of kinds of identity. The way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others are all embedded in language. National origin, socioeconomic class, communication networks based on the workplace and occupation, degree of integration into kinship structures: all these things and many more can be marked by means of variation in very clear ways. To add to this complexity, topic and setting put their own demands on variation.

Figures 1.2 through 1.9 provide data from a variety of sociolinguistic studies conducted in the US, with a range of relevant variables. What should be striking here is that for each case of variation (which we must recall is a small portion of the total range of variation happening in any of the speech communities at a given time) another constellation of possible social, stylistic, and geographic factors are at play.

LaFerriere’s 1979 study of the short–forty variable active in Boston found that the use of the innovative or newer value, [o], for a less regionally-marked [o], was not random, but correlated strongly with one of three ethnic identities and formality of the speech event:

All groups use the dialect variant [b] most frequently in casual speech, as expected, and least in formal speech; but the three groups contrast in the degree to which they use the variant. Jewish speakers have the lowest percentages of [b] in all styles; Italians have the highest; and Irish speakers have values parallel to and between the other two.

We see in Figure 1.2 that stylistic formality is consistently relevant to a person’s participation in this variation, regardless of ethnicity. Again and again, sociolinguistic studies have shown that amount of attention paid to speech is a crucial factor in the propagation of any change in progress.

Is there some more general relevance of this particular variable to ethnicity? To the vowel sound [o] before [r]? Absolutely not. When a sociolinguist goes into a community to study variation in the language, there is no way to predict what elements will be changing, in what directions, or based on what social differences between speakers. But because we have seen time and time again that certain kinds of social contrasts are likely to be embodied in linguistic variation, we would hypothesize that large ethnic populations with distinct “personalities” will distinguish themselves linguistically. Knack (1991) found that for the Jewish and Gentile populations of Grand Rapids, Michigan there were linguistic ways to mark this ethnicity which were very different from the Boston pattern. In addition to variation in the pronunciation of a particular vowel, the devoicing
Figures 1.3 and 1.4 indicate how clearly lames use language to distance themselves symbolically: R-lessness is common all along the eastern seaboard, but it is a variable which shows very fine social and stylistic distributions, as is particularly salient in African American sociolinguistic marking. Labov notes that the African American communities usually show a higher degree of r-lessness, as well as a more distinct style shifting toward using (r) in reading styles. “In general, it can be said that the (r) variables are more important in the Black community than anywhere else as indicators of formal, educated speech. This is even more true in Black communities in r-pronouncing areas, such as Philadelphia or Los Angeles” (1973: 89). In Figure 1.3, the “1390 Lames” (a reference to the building they live in) use postvocalic (r) in greater proportions than members of

of voiced (z) to unvoiced (s) between vowels is a way to signal Jewish identity. For example, Knack found that in Grand Rapids most Gentile speakers pronounce the [s] in the sentence She is over there with a voiced (z), whereas Jews will sometimes pronounce “is” with (z) and sometimes with (s). Jewish men are much more likely to use (z), and the more integrated the Jewish males are into the social and political Grand Rapids community, the less of the (s) variant they use. Jewish women, on the other hand, use more of the (s) variant when they are well integrated into the community. Knack hypothesizes that this distinction between Jewish men and women has to do with the role of Jewish women as responsible for maintaining the faith, “and thus [they] have a need to persist more obviously than Jewish men in their Jewish behavior, including its linguistic aspects. Devoiced (z), considered stereotypically Jewish, could be one of these aspects” (1991: 266).

Some of the very earliest quantitative studies of sociolinguistic variation looked at the walkin’ and talkin’ variable. In his study of adolescent male groups in Harlem and their language behavior, Labov found this variable to be a good indicator of an individual’s commitment to the vernacular culture. “Lames” in Labov’s study are individuals who remove themselves from the social context of the communication networks in which they would otherwise be integrated:

They are not hip, since they do not hang out. It is only by virtue of being available and on the street every day that anyone can acquire the deep familiarity with local doings and the sure command of local slang that are needed to participate in vernacular culture. To be “lame” means to be outside of the central group and its culture; it is a negative characterization . . .

Figures 1.3 and 1.4 indicate how clearly lames use language to distance themselves symbolically: R-lessness is common all along the eastern seaboard, but it is a variable which shows very fine social and stylistic distributions, as is particularly salient in African American sociolinguistic marking. Labov notes that the African American communities usually show a higher degree of r-lessness, as well as a more distinct style shifting toward using (r) in reading styles. “In general, it can be said that the (r) variables are more important in the Black community than anywhere else as indicators of formal, educated speech. This is even more true in Black communities in r-pronouncing areas, such as Philadelphia or Los Angeles” (1973: 89). In Figure 1.3, the “1390 Lames” (a reference to the building they live in) use postvocalic (r) in greater proportions than members of

Figure 1.2 Use of new vowel [o] in three speech styles for Italian, Irish, and Jewish speakers in the short–forty variable in Boston. Source: Adapted from LaFerriere 1986

Figure 1.3 Use of postvocalic (r) by style for gang members in Harlem. Source: Adapted from Labov 1973
any of the three gangs (VDC Series, T-Birds, Aces) do, and shift more strongly toward (r) use with increasing attention paid to speech.

In a similar way, we see in Figure 1.4 that the 1390 Lames show no participation at all in the *walkin' and talkin'* variable for the most formal reading style. Of the gangs, the T-Birds approach 25 percent use of the full form *-ing* in this style.

Studies of distribution of social variants over space are necessarily more limited because of the technological challenge they represent, but when they are done they provide some interesting data, as in Bailey et al.'s 1993 study of the *cock-hawk* (*cot-caught*) merger in Oklahoma. In Figure 1.5 it is clear that the new vowel is diffusing in Oklahoma in a hierarchical pattern, from areas of greater population density to lesser. In addition, the younger generation is using more of the newer vowel, in a wider area. Bailey sees the interstate highway system as relevant to the spatial and temporal spread of this particular change in progress:

Among younger generations, then, the urban/rural differences gradually begin to level out as the use of unrounded vowels in words like *hawk* diffuses from cities to the surrounding countryside. The interstate highway system, which provides easy access to urban centers for some rural areas but not for others, seems to be a primary mechanism for this hierarchical diffusion... the importance of these interstates in restructuring the rural population over the last three decades can hardly be overestimated.

(1993: 370)
Murray’s 1986 study of 240 residents of St. Louis shows how clearly a single variable can disclose information about socioeconomic class and the effect of attention to speech. We see in Figure 1.6 that while speakers are generally unaware of the variation between [u] and [ju] in words like duke, the variable [u], used most consistently by the lower socioeconomic class, shows sensitivity to attention paid to speech for the middle and upper classes. This particular variable has more social currency in the south than it does in the north. A parallel study of this variable in Idaho or Maine might not be as interesting.

Yet another combination of factors relevant to the distribution of linguistic variation is seen in Wolfram’s 1969 study of multiple negation among AAVE speakers in Detroit, as shown in Figure 1.7. Here socioeconomic class and gender are relevant to the degree to which an individual uses multiple negation: the higher the social class, the less likely AAVE speakers are to use this grammatical strategy; females use it less than males. Subsequent studies of this and related variables functioning in AAVE in Philadelphia and elsewhere have made it clear that there is a whole range of social, stylistic, and language internal effects on these variables. These include the way individuals are integrated into communication networks in the inner city, as well as the narrative function of the particular speech act (Labov and Harris 1986).

From Detroit’s AAVE speaking community to adolescent girls in the Palo Alto High School might seem a bit of a jump, but in fact Figure 1.8 indicates that what seem to be very different sets of social expectations and allegiances exert very similar pressures on language norms and function in remarkably similar ways.

The California Style Collective (CSC) study — an ongoing project — is one which departs from a socioeconomic stratificational approach to language variation, and looks at group style in a way which allows the examination of “production and reproduction of social meaning in variation” (1993: 2).

Preliminary study of the discourse marker like for one socially active teenager indicates that the variation is extremely complex. As the CSC pursue study of this particular marker, they will be looking at a variety of possible constraints on its use, from semantic effects, to topic of conversation. In the preliminary numbers shown in Figure 1.8, we see that “Trendy’s” use of like was strongest when she was talking about the social groups she was most comfortable with and identified with most closely (a). Like decreased as she talked about other social groups (b), or her plans for college (c).
Feagin’s work in Alabama (1979) shows how complex even apparently simple points of variation can be in the way they are distributed in the community. Figure 1.9 looks at invariant was for a wide variety of speakers. Here it becomes clear that sex, age and socioeconomic class must be considered in tandem before it becomes possible to understand the observed distributions. Feagin found that for this variable as for most of the others she looked at, adolescent girls were the least likely to use invariant was, and closest in their language overall to a more standardized US English.

This is what sociolinguists do: they look at active, socially structured variation to try to understand the process of language change. How it is initiated, how it moves, what it means. We try to find universals in the power and solidarity structures which are relevant to language communities of all types, from inner-city neighborhoods to villages. But that is where sociolinguistics usually stops. Once we have understood, for example, the social correlates of caught-cot variation for Oklahoma – the way changes in transportation and communication have effected diffusion of this change over generations – the job is done. We rarely ask why these facts are the way they are. We know who stigmatizes and avoids r-lessness, and who clings to it in spite of stigmatization, but we don’t understand what underlies the process of stigmatization. Fairclough points this out as an unfortunate omission, and outlines questions he thinks should follow: “How – in terms of the development of social relationships to power – was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being? How is it sustained? And how might it be changed to the advantange of those who are dominated by it?” (1989: 7–8).

Sociolinguists have established beyond a doubt that variation is an intrinsic and inseparable feature of the spoken language. Thus the next
and logical question must be: what is a standard language? Isn’t that term an oxymoron? And if such a language exists, what purpose does it really serve?

Because the necessity of referring to different varieties of English with specific labels cannot long be avoided, it is necessary at this point to consider the way people talk about language.