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CHAPTER 1

Variation and Change in English

1.1 Introduction

Linguistics is concerned with the study of language, including theories of language and the ways in which a language is structured and patterned. Language can be theorised and described in a general and abstract way, or a particular language can be categorised and described. However when we look at how language is actually used in everyday life it becomes clear that, far from being spoken and written in exactly the same way by everybody, it is in fact tremendously varied. This chapter considers different spoken varieties of English and the extent to which the society and communities in which we live affect the ways in which we speak and write.

Section 1.2 begins by defining 'language', 'dialect', 'accent', 'variety' and 'standard' English, and then considers people's attitudes towards variations in language use. Section 1.3 outlines the history of the standardisation of English in order to illustrate why dialectal variations persist in England and the United Kingdom as a whole. This section also traces the origins of prejudice against variations that continues to this day. In the United States the processes of standardisation have been very different from those in England. The resultant variations are fewer than in the United Kingdom and there is less prejudice against them. Our investigation of these two examples shows that linguistic variations depend a great deal on specific social, economic, political, geographic and historical variables.

Section 1.4 discusses two methodological approaches to research into variation, the first of which focuses on linguistic variables and the second on social variables and social networks. Investigation of variations in phonology, morphology and syntax is the realm of traditional dialectology and can be found in regional studies such as *The Survey of English Dialects* (Orton, 1962) and *A Handbook of Varieties of English* (Kortmann and Schneider, 2004). Studies of social variables are the focus of sociolinguistic dialectology, which considers the effect of social factors such as race, class and gender on linguistic variation. Examples of studies in this field are Labov (1966, 1972a, 1979) and Trudgill (1974, 1978). More recently, Milroy (1987) and Milroy and Gordon (2003) have examined the influence of social networks on language. They argue that, in addition to linguistic and social variables, attention should be paid to the communities and contexts within which speech occurs. Finally, Section 1.5 provides students with guidance on conducting their own studies of variation and change, and Section 1.6 offers suggestions for further reading.

1.2 Language, dialect, accent and variety

1.2.1 Language

Let us consider the meaning of the term 'language' and to what it refers. In the first of the companion volumes in this series Jeffries (2006) distinguishes between language as a system and language use. A language system is an idealised form of the language in question, which differs from the way in which it is actually used. In the second companion volume Chapman (2006) considers language from three theoretical perspectives: as a type of behaviour, as a state of mind and as a form of communication. The sociolinguistic approach to the study of language considers language as behaviour. It takes into account the regional and social situations in which language occurs, as well as the social and linguistic factors that affect how speakers relate to one another. Thus the sociolinguistic approach to language, rather than being concerned with language in a general or abstract sense, asks questions such as 'What is a language?' and 'What is language for?' Hence language is not just about communication but also about identity, a factor that is paramount in sociolinguistics.

Deciding which criteria to adopt when defining a language, is far from straightforward. Take English for example. Who are the speakers of English? Are they solely the people who live in the country, England, that gives its name to the language? We generally assume that all the people who live in a geographically defined country speak the language associated with it: French in France, German in Germany and so on. However it is not always the case that all the people who live in a country speak the same language, or that the language is the exclusive property of that country. This is certainly not the case with English, which is spoken as the first language not only in the countries that make up the United Kingdom, but also in many other countries around the world, including the United States and Australia. Moreover it is widely used by speakers of other languages throughout the world as the language of business, diplomacy, medicine and the internet.

We should also take account of the fact that there are many countries that are not monolingual: that is, they have more than one official language. For example in Switzerland there are three official languages: German, French and Italian. Switzerland recognises itself as a multilingual society whereas most of us would agree that Britain (with the exception of Wales and some parts of Scotland) is thought of as a monolingual society in which everyone speaks English all the time. The same could be said of the United States. However if we look at the actual languages spoken there are many others besides English. So far from being monolingual, these countries are actually multilingual, with many inhabitants speaking languages other than English.

One of the countries that makes up Great Britain, the principality of Wales, has two official languages – Welsh and English – and in some areas most of the inhabitants are bilingual and school children receive a bilingual education. This situation is similar to that in the province of Quebec in Canada, where people are bilingual in French and English. In the United States there is no official language and legislation to impose one is forbidden by the constitution, although to all intents and purposes English functions as the national language through its use in education, business, the law and so on. What these examples illustrate then is that language depends not only on geography but also on history, politics and economics.

The association between language and nationhood or nationality is a very strong and powerful one, as is the association between language and identity of all kinds: regional and social as well as national. The language, languages or dialects of a language that we speak are an integral part of who we are, and attempts to impose one language or a variation of it are often bound up with the exercise of power and ideology. The reasons why a language becomes associated with a particular nation are many and varied, and they result from a combination of historical and social developments. Throughout history one of the first things an invading force has imposed on the conquered people is its language, particularly in respect of political, economic and educational institutions and the like. Examples are the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the Roman colonisation of numerous countries from the first century BC and the combining of a vast swathe of national territories into the Soviet Union from 1922. What counts as the language of a country at any particular moment in time, therefore, is not as simple and straightforward as it seems. The term language is also very difficult if not impossible to define linguistically, as the example in the following section illustrates.

1.2.2 The Ebonics debate

In December 1996 the Oakland School District Board in the US State of California passed a resolution that gave official recognition to Ebonics, a language that was viewed as distinct from English. Ebonics is a compound word made up of from the words 'Ebony', meaning black, and 'phonics' meaning sound. Thereafter schools in the Oakland district were required to provide black pupils with a bilingual education in Ebonics, and English. The impetus for this resolution came from the persistently low educational achievements of black students, who made up over 50 per cent of the school population in the district. The issue quickly became national news and provoked a fierce debate across the United States. Amongst the topics raised was whether or not black English could be shown to be a linguistically separate language. This brought to the fore the broader, more politically sensitive question of the relationship between language and ethnicity, and between African Americans and Anglo-Americans in contemporary American society. Hence the debate moved away from the matter of Ebonics *per se* and on to the issue of equality: the right to equal educational provision for all young Americans regardless of ethnicity and, by extension, full participatory status in American life regardless of class, ethnicity and gender (Clark, 2001, pp. 237–52).

According to Tatalovich (1995, p. 1) whenever an opportunity arises in the United States to debate matters of language, 'ordinary people rise to defend the English language against those who speak other tongues'. He points out that the Oakland resolution, in common with similar episodes throughout the history of the United States, 'is symptomatic of the debate over whether the United States should reflect a dominant English-speaking majoritarianism or encourage a multilingual culture' (ibid., p. 2). Thus for Tatalovich, controversies over language are not only linguistic conflicts but also moral ones. As noted in the previous section, although English is by far the most common language in the United States and is used in most areas of public life, the constitution prevents it from being enshrined as the official language. Therefore, unlike in many of the other major English-speaking countries in the world, the US federal government has not been able to assert the dominance of English or legislate any national language policy. Despite this immigrants who wish to acquire US citizenship are required to take a test in English.

Not surprisingly the Ebonics debate found its way onto the agenda of the Linguistics Society of America. In 1997 the society passed a resolution calling for Ebonics, alongside African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Vernacular Black English, to be recognised as a systematic language governed by linguistic rules. However the society refused to be drawn on the issue of classification, on the ground that the distinction between 'languages' and 'dialects' or 'varieties' was usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. It argued that what was important from a linguistic and educational perspective was not whether Ebonics and AAVE could be called languages but that they, in common with other speech varieties, be recognised as systematic and governed by linguistic rules. At the heart of the debate, then, was not what counted as a language but the social and political issues that surrounded the establishment and maintenance of language hierarchies.

If linguistics cannot help us to define the term language, another approach is to think of language in terms of subdivisions or as a collection of mutually intelligible dialects, such as the south-west dialect of France, the Black Country dialect of English, the Bavarian dialect of German and so on. So English as a language consists not only of what is known as standard English (see Section 1.3), but also of all other dialects that exist within the geographical boundaries of England and elsewhere. Mutual intelligibility is not an important criterion, since different languages as well as dialects can be mutually intelligible. For example Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, though accepted as different languages, can each be understood by speakers of the other languages. Other factors relating to intelligibility do have to be taken into account, however, such as an individual's degree of exposure to a language, her or his educational background and willingness to understand.

1.2.3 Dialect, accent and variety

One way of defining a language is as a group of dialects and accents that have certain forms and structures in common. Put simply, dialect refers to words and syntactic structure, whereas accent refers to the sounds that speakers produce and the intonations and pitches that accompany these sounds. The two often go hand in hand. For example if people speak in a regional dialect of English, such as Scouse in the North West or Black Country in the Midlands, then their pronunciation will be particular to that area. If you were to walk north from Land's End in Cornwall to John O'Groats in the very north of Scotland you would hear a progressive range of accents and dialects. This a known as a dialect continuum or a chain of mutual intelligibility; that is, there is no distinct or complete break from one dialect and accent to another, and speakers of geographically adjacent dialects can understand one another. However the cumulative effect is such that the greater the geographical separation, the greater the difficulty of understanding what people say. Europe has many dialect continua, one example of which is Romance, which stretches across the Iberian peninsula through France and parts of Belgium down to the southern tip of Italy.

There is also a social dimension to accents and dialects. As Chambers and Trudgill (1980, p. 3) point out, dialects are commonly viewed as:

> substandard, low status, often rustic forms of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige. DIALECT is also a term which is often applied to other forms of language, particularly those spoken in more isolated parts of the world, which have no written form. And dialects are often regarded as some kind of (often erroneous) deviation from a norm – as aberrations of a correct or standard form of language.

According to Trudgill and Chambers people who speak with rural accents are sometimes typified as dim-witted but trusting, whereas people with some urban accents may be stereotyped as quick-witted but untrustworthy. By contrast speakers of standard English with a Received Pronunciation accent (see Section 1.3.1) are often portrayed as more intelligent than speakers of other dialects as well as morally and socially superior.

Linguists prefer to use the term 'variety' when describing variations in language as this has none of the negative connotations associated with the terms dialect and accent, and fits in with the idea of descriptive linguistics; that is, basing descriptions of language upon actual use. It can also be applied across a wider range of language features. For example we can talk of linguistic variation, historical variation, social variation, geographic variation, stylistic variation and so on.

Language operates across two dimensions simultaneously: the horizontal dimension of space, called the 'diachronic' axis, and the vertical dimension of time, called the 'synchronic axis'. In addition there is a social dimension, which takes account of variations between social classes and cuts across both. The reason why there is so much geographic variation in language in England and so little in the United States is historical, as is the prejudice commonly held against linguistic variations. Consequently in order to comprehend variations in English and the attitudes towards them it is necessary to consider the social history of English.

1.3 Standards of English

1.3.1 What is standard English?

The term standard English (SE) is the one most commonly applied to the language 'English'. It is the variety of English used in public life, for example in education, the law, medicine and government. Nowadays it has no geographical boundary and is used throughout the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. In England it has an associated accent, known as Received Pronunciation, or RP for short. Because of their origins and history, SE and RP are closely associated with the middle and upper classes and are known variously as 'the Queen's English' or 'BBC English'. The concept of RP is a peculiarly English one and it has no equivalent in any other part of the English-speaking world. Some linguists argue that SE is best defined as the written form of English, because it is not a matter of pronunciation and is therefore not tied to any particular accent (see: Crystal, 1995; Trudgill, 1999). Rather it is a matter of grammar, vocabulary and orthography (spelling). However Stubbs (1986) argues that accent is involved in the notion of standard since people have an idea of what is and what is not standard in pronunciation. That is, RP is widely regarded as the standard accent of British English, just as standard English is widely regarded as the standard written form of English.

There is also disagreement amongst linguists as to whether SE can be classed as a dialect. Some, such as Chambers and Trudgill (1980) and Milroy (1987) insist that it is, pointing out that all speakers speak at least one dialect and that standard English is as much a dialect as any other form of English. Thus some speakers may have no other variety than SE whilst others may have a regional variety and SE. Other linguists disagree, on the ground that SE differs from dialects in a number of ways, especially in respect of it having its own writing system. Because of this they argue that the study of dialect should concentrate upon speech. This, however, ignores the fact that many non-standard English dialects in England, such as the Black Country dialect in the West Midlands and Geordie in the North East, have an established form of writing. Also, if standard English is not a dialect it is difficult to see what else it could be.

Whilst regional accents and dialects go hand in hand, standard English can be spoken in any accent. So it is possible (but not very likely) that someone may speak the Geordie dialect with an RP accent, but it is both possible and probable that someone will speak standard English with a Geordie accent. Indeed the BBC, once the bastion of standard English and RP, has in recent years adopted a much more liberal policy towards employing presenters with regional accents. When the BBC was founded in the 1930s all broadcasters spoke standard English with a uniform RP accent, but nowadays a range of regional accents can be heard. Indeed the attitude towards the use of regional dialects and accents in public life has altered so significantly since the 1930s that in 2005 the BBC launched a national campaign, called *Voices*, to celebrate and promote regional linguistic diversity. In addition to television and radio programmes on the subject the BBC, working together with dialectologists at the universities of Leeds and Cardiff, is conducting a comprehensive survey of contemporary English dialects and accents via the internet and phone-ins. The BBC takes issue with the correlation between RP and BBC English, and is fighting hard to dissociate itself from any gate-keeping role in language use and accusations of holding back the tide of language change. It argues that the fact that news broadcasters spoke RP in the early days was more the product of the restricted group from which employees were drawn than part of a deliberate policy. (Nonetheless employees from outside that group were given elocution lessons to ensure their use of RP.) However if you call the accent normally used in BBC news broadcasts BBC English, and accept that it is an example of RP, then by definition BBC news broadcasters are RP speakers. This circularity in defining BBC English in relation to RP and RP in relation to BBC English renders both concepts meaningless. It is also ironic that this is happening at a time when the relationship between RP and so-called BBC English is being viewed as a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, and initiatives such as *Voices* aside, there is still a strong correlation in Britain between dialect, accent and social class. There still is a hierarchy of English dialects and accents, with SE and RP being held as the most prestigious, and those of speakers from some large urban conurbations being viewed as the least prestigious. Speakers of the most marked form of RP appear at the top of the pyramid and tend to be accorded the highest status, whereas speakers with a marked regional pronunciation are accorded the lowest. Even in London, which is the historical centre of standard English, there are geographically bound accents and dialects that are given less prestige and made subject to ridicule. No wonder that the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1916 that 'it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him.' Such prejudices go back centuries to the time when the process of standarising English began, as discussed in the following subsection.

1.3.2 A brief history of the standardisation of English in England

On any day of any week we can open English newspapers and find articles on or letters about the degeneration and corruption of the English language. We might be tempted to think of this as a modern concern, but in fact it dates back to at least the fifteenth century. The need for a unified language arose during the late middle ages and the beginning of the Renaissance period for political and economic reasons. Politically, it was becoming necessary for the holders of power to be able to communicate in a common language with their counterparts far away, and economically a common language was a necessity for trade. This concept of a national language also began to be linked to the notion of national identity, and as a result the nation states of modern-day Europe began to take shape.

Haugen (1972) divides the process of standardisation into four stages:

1. Selection: an existing dialect is selected to be standardised. In the case of English, this was the East Midlands dialect of the Middle English period.

2. Elaboration: the chosen dialect is expanded and elaborated so that it can fulfil the variety of functions it is intended to serve. That is, the vocabulary is extended and/or the grammatical structure is elaborated. In the case of English, the East Midland vocabulary was supplemented by words from French and Latin and its grammatical structure was elaborated by the adoption of Latinate constructions.
3. Codification: the full vocabulary and new grammar is written down. Once codified in writing, the language became an object of consciousness in that it can be seen as well as heard, and is thus 'fixed' or 'pinned down'. Changes to the language then become subject to regulation and control by its community of users, especially those in the more powerful sections of society.
4. Implementation: the chosen variety is implemented throughout a community, usually by becoming the language of instruction in education and being adopted by public institutions such as the law, government and the media.

The evolution of the English language can be divided into four periods: Old English (400–1100 AD); Middle English (*ca.*1100–1500 AD); Early Modern English (*ca.*1500–1800 AD) and Modern English (1800 to the present). By the end of the Middle English period, England had five main dialects, each with its own history. The Old English Northumbrian dialect had separated into Scots and Northern English, the Mercian dialect had become the West Midland and East Midland dialects, the Southern dialect was spoken south of the Rivers Thames and Severn and Kentish was the dialect of the far South East.

People of all social backgrounds, from very rich to very poor, spoke in the dialect of the region in which they lived. Moreover Medieval writers wrote in the language of their birthplace, so all the English dialects had a written equivalent. Even after English was standardised and codified in writing, people continued to speak and write in their local dialect. Indeed many of today's regional dialects, such as that of the Black Country, can be traced back to the Middle English period and syntactic forms, vocabulary and pronunciation have remained much the same.

Although English had yet to be standardised Renaissance writers often referred to a variety of English called the 'common dialecte' or 'common language'. Common, that is, in the sense of a shared usage and understanding. Identifying, elaborating, and codifying this language took place in the Early Modern English period, (*ca.* 1500–1800). Not without contestation, the East Midland dialect had been selected for the purpose. This was largely due to the fact that the region had come to exert tremendous power – intellectually, economically and politically.

Figure 1.1 Middle English dialect map

Unlike in other European nation states that were forming at that time, in England the standardisation of language did not happen in a planned or systematic way. For example, whilst the Tudors were keen to establish a standard language in the interest of national unity, they did not appoint a body of people to plan and regulate the process. During the Renaissance (1400–1700) two important factors affected the course of standardisation: the invention of printing and the increased mobility of the aristocracy, both of which helped to promote the selected dialect over the others. Another notable feature of the construction of the language was the borrowing of words from Latin, Greek, Italian and Spanish. This was the result of the diffusion of classical learning across Europe, with Latin and Greek becoming the languages of 'civilised' and educated people. Between 1500 and 1650 more than 10,000 new words were incorporated into the emerging language. Newly invented words such as *allurement*, *allusion* and *atmosphere*, were added to those borrowed from other languages, for instance *bombast*, *chocolate*, *genteel*, and *shock*.

There was also a change in the pronunciation of vowels to sounds that are more or less recognisable today. For example Chaucer's pronunciation of 'name', /nɑːm/, became Shakespeare's /neːm/, or /neɪm/ in today's RP accent. This became known as the great vowel shift. No one knows precisely why it happened, but one suggestion is that it was to do with speakers' sense of their own prestige (see for example Baugh and Cable, 2002). At a time of growing urbanisation in London and the formation of the modern class system, sensitivity had been growing to accents that betrayed people's origins. During the sixteenth century people from East Anglia and the Midlands who moved to London did not want to sound like 'country bumpkins' and therefore tried to emulate the local accent. As often happens when people do this they hypercorrected their pronunciation; that is, they over emphasised the sound they wished to make, for instance by putting an 'h' before vowels, as in *whonder* and *whay*. These hypercorrected pronunciations gradually became an indicator of rising wealth and were emulated by others. Thus what was originally an accidental innovation became prestigious and spread. Similar vowel shifts did not occur in all regional dialects, and this accounts for some of the variations that continue to this day.

This new variety of English rapidly became dissociated from its East Midland origins. Indeed it was viewed more in terms of a foreign language, designed to function as a lingua franca (a language used internationally in trade or business) in the same way as Ancient Greek and Latin had done. During this period prescriptivism took a firm hold on the standardisation of English, especially in the case of establishing a grammatical structure. This was based on the notion that the description of a language should abide by the set of rules prescribed for it, rather than, as is the case with modern grammar, describing how it actually works. In England, then, the codification of English was marked by the theoretical foundations of prescriptivism, which inextricably linked language to social class and moral values (see Chapman, 2006, section 4.1). Throughout Renaissance Europe questions of language were tied to questions of literary language, and linguistics – as it existed then – was the study of language in general, particularly poetic language. A distinction was made between literary, including poetic, language and the form of language used for transactional purposes. In England, by contrast, writings on literary language doubled as texts on English usage, as though the two styles of language were or should be the same. This written, literary form of standard English entrenched even further the link between standard English and social class, since its use demanded a degree of literacy that was not possessed by the vast majority of the population. Education thus played an important part in the standardisation process and it continues to be important in its reproduction and maintenance.

The next step in the process was to codify the new standard English in dictionaries and grammars. The first of these were written with the purpose of disseminating the 'best' forms of English. The idea that the 'best' English was that spoken by the 'best' people, as personified by the nobility, gave rise to the notion that everything else was not only linguistically but also morally and socially inferior. All the other dialects – Northern, Southern, West Midland and Kentish – were treated as second class and ignored, unless written as poetry. However they did not fossilise but continued to be used by the inhabitants of those regions.

Towards the end of the Early Modern English period there was talk of establishing a language academy of the kind set up in France (1635) and Italy (1582). However this idea found little public sympathy, and it was pointed out that the French tended to change their language despite having an academy. In England language was perceived as an embodiment of the spirit of individual liberty and resistance to central regulation. Nevertheless this did not prevent people from trying to fix the language by means of dictionaries and grammars. Samuel Johnson saw his dictionary as a means 'by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained and its duration lengthened' (Johnson, 1755). It may seem odd to us that there was ever a time when words did not have a standard spelling, but before Johnson's dictionary this was the case. Words were spelt in several ways without much thought or anxiety. For instance Shakespeare used five different spellings of his own name during the course of his life.

Johnson's dictionary was by no means exhaustive and he excluded all terms to do with manufacturing, law, medicine and the physical sciences on the grounds that 'I could not visit caverns to learn the miner's language, nor take a voyage to perfect my skill in the dialect of navigation, nor visit the warehouses of merchants, and shops of artificers, to gain the names of wares, tools and operations, of which no mention is found in books' (ibid.). Johnson's principal sources of spelling and definition were literary texts.

By the beginning of the Modern English period (1800), England had been divided geographically by regional dialect and accent, and socially by the fact that standard English had become the language not only of government and administration but also of the cultural elite. Thus contrary to what had originally been intended, standard English served to divide rather than unite. This situation subsequently changed and the use of standard English spread throughout the country to all social classes, especially after 1870 when compulsory education was introduced in England (1872 in Scotland). Spoken and written standard English was held up as a model of refinement and, with the expansion of the British Empire, a carrier of political power world-wide.

During the nineteenth century, language, as with science and other disciplines, became to be an object of study. For Max Muller, the first professor of philology at Oxford, the object of study was language in general rather than any specific aspects of its use. The academic study of language as a science resulted in deviations from standard English being viewed not only as improper speech but also as improper behaviour. Thus speaking the 'superior', 'refined' language demonstrated that one belonged to a superior class, and speaking a 'vulgar' language correspondingly meant that one belonged to a vulgar class. As Smith (1984, pp. 2–3) puts it:

> The study of universal grammar at that time stipulated that languages were fundamentally alike in that they represented the mind, and fundamentally different in the quality of mind and civilisation that they represented . . . By dividing the population into two extremes, ideas about language firmly distinguished those who were within the civilised world from those who were entirely outside it.

The grammar books and dictionaries used in schools during the first half of the twentieth century continued to be prescriptive. Grammar was thought of as a universally applicable concept and if a language did not fit the grammatical prescription it was deemed imperfect and full of errors. This concept remained unchallenged until the 1950s when the first modern grammars were written. These were based on description rather than prescription and represented a seismic shift in linguistic grammatical theory.

In the 1920s the influential phonetician Wyld (1927, p. 606) argued that RP was 'superior, from the character of its vowel sounds, to any other form of English, in beauty and clarity'. Appealing to aesthetics, however, is hardly a scientific basis for arguing the case for superiority. Wyld tried to prove scientifically that there was a hierarchy of pronunciation, with RP ranking as the most superior accent. His ideas were very influential in the English curricula in elementary schools and the teacher training institutions and this persisted long afterwards. For example when a national curriculum was reintroduced into English schools in the late 1980s, and revised shortly afterwards in the early 1990s, one of the most controversial issues was around the teaching of standard English and RP in the speaking and listening curriculum (see Clark, 2001).

Although RP is not exclusive to any social class, throughout its history it has been associated with the upper and upper-middle classes, whilst regional accents have been associated with the lower-middle and working classes. In recent evaluations of speakers whose speech differs solely in terms of accent, the speakers of RP are always rated as sounding more pleasant, having greater prestige, being more ambitious and competent, and being better suited for higher-status jobs than speakers with regional accents. In some earlier studies, however, RP speakers were rated as less sincere, trustworthy, friendly, generous and kind than speakers with other accents. The prestige associated with RP is therefore a social rather than a linguistic phenomenon and can change.

Another important point to note here is that made by Aitchison (1981, 2001), namely that changes in language are neither degenerative nor progressive: they simply happen and no amount of 'fixing' can prevent this from occurring. There is no way of predicting what the English language will be like in another five centuries, but it will be different from today's English. The fact that English has not remained constant over time is due to its being a living language, and change is an integral aspect of this. This has implications for the ways in which language variations and change are studied, and especially for the methods used to reconstruct our linguistic past.

Dialects and accents also continue to change, as do our attitudes towards them. Although it could be said that accents and dialects have to some extent converged and and are now more mutually intelligible than they were, say, two centuries ago, there is still a great deal of variation. The factors that bring about changes in dialects and accents are difficult to determine, but like the great vowel shift they are likely to have a social origin rather than simply being a linguistic change (see Section 1.4).

This section has described how the English language became standardised in England, explained why regional varieties persist to this day and noted where notions such as 'correctness' and 'purity' of language come from. The next section considers the process of standardisation in a different national context and illustrates how, although the process may have been similar the result has been very different.

1.3.3 A brief history of the standardisation of English in the United States

American English now dominates the world. Standard American English is taught to foreign learners around the globe and it is not unusual for people from the Pacific, the Far East and even Europe to speak English with an American accent and to use American idioms. From the 1940s onwards American English consolidated its position through the US dominance of the entertainment industry and later of information technology and the internet. American English, like British standard English, owes a great deal to its social and cultural history.

The main contrasts between American English and British English lie in lexical variation and variations in pronunciation. There is very little syntactic variation. Many words, such as *moccasin*, *jazz*, *zucchini*, *bagel*, and *kosher* have been borrowed from the languages of indigenous peoples and non-English speaking immigrants. Some recognisably British words have developed variant meanings, for example *mad* can mean *angry*; *Are you through?* means Are you finished?; and *bad* or *wicked* can mean *good*. There is also a good deal of cross-over between the two varieties of English in that American technical innovations have imported into British English words such as *program*, *telephone* and *typewriter*. Other words reflect cultural and environmental differences between the two countries, including *lynch*, *blizzard*, *joy-ride*, *bayou*, *levy* and *prairie*. In British English you drive a *car*, fill up with *petrol*, wipe your *windscreen*, check your *bonnet* and *boot* are shut, drive down the *dual carriageway* or *motorway* and overtake *lorries*. In American English you drive an *automobile*, fill up with *gas*, wipe your *windshield*, check that your *hood* and *trunk* are shut, drive down the *divided highway* or *freeway* and overtake *trucks*. In England people *queue* whilst in America they *stand in line*. Phonetic variations also exist in the United States, but given its relative youth as a country these are not as pronounced as the regional variations in England and tend to be related to divisions between urban and rural areas and between different ethnic groups.

American English dates back to the seventeenth century and the colonisation of the 'New World' by a number of European nations. When the Pilgrim Fathers and subsequent colonists landed in America from 1620 they brought with them the newly developed standard English and this became the common language in the various English colonies. Hence American English was founded on the pre-existing grammars and syntactic structure of British standard English and the association between linguistic variation and social class that was so prevalent in British English was absent. In terms of standardisation, then, American English followed a very different course from that in England and the differences between British English and American English arose during the subsequent processes of elaboration and codification. In order to survive, the early colonists enlisted the aid of native Indians and drew on their local knowledge. During the course of this process, Indian words such as *moose*, *wigwam* and *naiack* (meaning a point or corner and the origin of the expression *that neck of the woods*) became part of the vocabulary. Dillard (1976) estimates that some 17,000 of these borrowed words are still in use today.

As intimated above, the English were not the only new inhabitants of the continent. Dutch traders landed shortly after the first pilgrims and established colonies on Manhattan island and along the Hudson River. Meanwhile Germans formed colonies near Philadelphia. As time went on some colonists expanded their horizons beyond the East coast. A number of pioneers moved westwards while others travelled to the south, encountering colonies of French and Spanish settlers as they went. As unfamiliar terrains and wildlife were encountered, names were needed for them. The French settlers had already named most of the geographical features and natural flora and fauna around the Saint Lawrence and Mississippi Rivers, and words such as *chowder*, *bayou*, *voyager* and *brave* were absorbed into the English pioneers' lexicon. From Spanish, which had moved north to the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean islands and South and Central America, came words such as *alfalfa*, *pumpkin*, *canyon*, *chaparral*, *corral*, *apache*, *fiesta* and *stampede*. In 1804 the explorers, Lewis and Clark led an exploration of the unknown territories west of the Mississippi. As they journeyed they named everything that passed before them. Thus a new vocabulary, distinct from that in Britain, was constructed to cater to all the new aspects of life in the colonies.

Although numerous languages existed in America in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and despite the anti-British sentiments that prevailed during the War of Independence (1775–83), English became the lingua franca for communication between speakers of different languages. In Jefferson's Declaration of Independence no official language was named as this was seen as contrary both to the spirit of freedom and pluralism of the time and to a constitution that espoused egalitarianism. Instituting a national language was seen as redolent of the monarchical policies that the migrants to the New World had left behind. Nevertheless, while the constitution proscribed English from being recognised as the official language of the United States, in practice it was and still is the only language spoken in most areas of public life, including government, the media and education.

The alternative to a national language, it was proposed, was a distinct form of English that would reflect the American cultural and national identity. in this regard Noah Webster was arguably one of the most important men in the development of the American language. He not only compiled the first American English dictionary incorporating words and phrases from the many peoples who inhabited the country, but was also aware of the need for a culturally independent society, not one that was still influenced by Britain. The printed word was the most powerful medium of communication at the time, and in order to disseminate and propagate a new national culture a national book trade was required (Simpson, 1986, p. 58). As a fervent nationalist Webster envisaged a purely American set of manners, morals, politics and culture. He proclaimed the need to establish a national language as well as a national government: as an independent nation its honour requires a system of its own, in language as well as in government (quoted in Mencken, 1921, p. 12).

To make cultural distinctions between America and Britain, Webster initially devised a completely new system of spelling, but he later settled on modification rather than wholesale change, realising the impossibility of implementing such a system. He deplored the pronunciations and spellings in the written English of the time, believing that the British system of spelling was class-ridden and created divisions in society as it demanded an educated knowledge of the language and was therefore inaccessible not only to the lower classes but also to foreign nationals. Webster resolved to construct spellings that were more uniform in their sounds than those proposed by Johnson. For example he excised the 'u' in the suffix '-our', so *honour* became *honor* and so on; reversed the final letters of words ending with -re to form *theater* and *center*; changed the 'c' to 's' in words such as *defense*, and the suffix -ise to -ize; and dropped the doubling of consonants in words such as *traveling* and *program*, as well as the silent 'e' in the latter.

Webster claimed that simplifying spelling in this way would make it easier for the primarily agrarian population to learn to write, and that this would assist the development of a uniquely American culture. It would also make the language easier for newcomers to learn. Moreover he saw his modifications as challenging British people's assumption that the English language belonged to them and that any change to it was solely their prerogative.

By the mid nineteenth century, cultural divergence and isolation, coupled with Webster's influence, had resulted in a form of English that was noticeably different from that used in Britain. However arguments continued on both sides of the Atlantic about the nature and purpose of this new form of English. In Britain 'Americanism' became a pejorative term, and in 1842 Charles Dickens wrote in his *American Notes* that he was at a loss when asked by a waiter if he wanted his food 'right away': 'I need not tell you that the prevailing grammar [in America] is more than doubtful, and that the oddest idioms are received idioms' (Dickens, 2000, p. 14). However what were sometimes thought of as aberrations were actually forms of English that had fallen out of use in Britain but were continuing to be used in America. For example the word *sick* (meaning to be unwell) had been widely used in Shakespeare's time and was still in use in America, but in Britain it had changed to *ill*. The past participle *gotten* had also been in use in Elizabethan times. Other terms that were common in Elizabethan England were *fall* for *autumn*, *progress* as a verb, *mean* for *unpleasant*; and *deck of cards* for *pack of cards*.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was also a literary canon of American English with writers such as James Fennimore Cooper and Mark Twain encapsulating the essence of frontier America in their works. The poet Ralph Emerson had declared that now America was free from the literary constraints of English romantic poetry, an American poet was needed to represent the nation's poetic aspirations. Walt Whitman established himself as that poet with works such as *Leaves of Grass* (1855, see Whitman, 2005). Literary achievements may seem trivial in the context of the development of a language, but the establishment of a literary canon is an indication of linguistic recognition.

During the twentieth century, the dissemination of American English throughout the world – via the entertainment media and later the internet – transformed it into a global language. There was also a reverse flow between the two varieties of English, with British people adopting terms such as *okay* and *hi*. Other examples are shown in Table 1.1.

There have been numerous analyses of the lexical differences between the two varieties of English, spawning a large dictionary industry. A distinct characteristic of the differentiation of early American English from British English was the formation of new words by means of **back formation** and **word blends**. One of the consequences of this is known as **tall talk**.

Back formation is the creation of new terms, usually verbs, by removing affixes from an existing word. American English had many nouns with the suffix -*ion*. When related verbs did not exist they were created by deleting the suffix and adding an 'e'. Early examples of this were the formation of *locate* from *location* in 1652, *donate* from *donation* (1795), *commute* from *commutation* (1865) and *electrocute* from *electrocution* (1889). More recent derivations that have removed different suffixes are *housekeep*, *burgle*, *shoplift* and *babysit*.

Word blends refers to the blending of phonological elements of existing words to form a new term. This practice has always had a place in the evolution of English but it is especially prevalent in American English. Examples are:

Cablegram	(from cable and telegram)
Travelog	(from travel and monologue)
Newscast	(from news and broadcast)
Telecast	(from television and broadcast)
Motel	(from motor and hotel)
Brunch	(from breakfast and lunch)

Most of these American terms have now been assimilated into British English.

Tall talk refers to the imagery and vivid expressions that have been central to American linguistic development, created by processes similar to back formation and word blending. During the frontier times the nation was a rough and ready one, but frontiersmen, desiring to make the ordinary seem grander than it actually was, elaborated and exaggerated their descriptions to spawn a host of bizarre lexical creations, including *ripsnitious*, *absquatulate*, *flusticated*, *elegantiferously* and *teetotacuiously*. Tall talk also exists in contemporary American English, such as *discombobulating*, *rambunctious*, *fantabulous* and *bodacious*.

Table 1.1 American words and idioms that have been absorbed into British English

Terms			Idioms
french-fries	truck	movie	fly off the handle
snoop	bar (pub)	has-been (adjective)	give me the bottom line
teenager	fan(sports)	burger	pass the buck
soap opera	parking ticket	download	it's a walk in the park
commute	gameshow	phoney	it comes with the territory
babysitter	downsize	gimmick	take the bull by the horns
gridlock	hospitalize	hopefully	let the cat out of the bag

By far the greatest variation between British English and American English lies in the phonological distinctions of accent. Although American accents are more homogeneous than British ones there are differences in accent across the United States: Labov (1997) identifies eight. Nonetheless American accents are far more uniform than those in Britain, and this is one of the reasons why American English is so much more appealing to foreign learners. The greatest difference is the number of vowel phonemes. Both British English and American English have the same number of consonant phonemes (24) but RP has 20 vowel phonemes while General American (GA) has 16. This is probably due to the fact that many American English accents are rhotic (see Jeffries, 2006, sections 1.4, 2.3.4). This means that the phoneme /r/ is pronounced after vowels, whereas British speakers may omit an orthographic 'r'. Another distinguishing feature is intervocality, where the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ are, through a process of voicing, merged together and words such as *ladder* and *latter* sound identical.

In the United States, unlike in Britain, the majority of regional dialects are largely free from social stigma and prejudice, but there is one notable exception: African American English (AAE). The latter is an umbrella term for African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English (BE), Inner City English (ICE) and Ebonics (see Section 1.2.2). It is spoken by many in the large population of Americans of African descent, and is a consequence of the historical discrimination against African Americans that isolated them both socially and from mainstream American speech. There are some who equate AAVE with inferior intelligence and cultural backwardness because, they claim, it is a deficient or incomplete language. Others believe that different races inherently speak differently. The former view has no linguistic foundation and it is as unscientific in reference to AAVE as it would be to standard American English, Russian or Chinese. Equally a child's race plays no part in the language it learns: a white child raised in an AAVE environment will learn to speak AAVE just as a black child raised by a white middle-class American family will speak standard American English. The position accorded to AAVE and its speakers in the United States, and to a lesser extent the speakers of regional dialects in the United Kingdom, illustrate just how deeply entrenched attitudes towards and prejudices against certain types of language use are, and the social and cultural thinking that forms the basis of these attitudes and prejudices.

1.4 Studies in variation and change

1.4.1 Linguistic variation

Early twentieth century research into dialects and accents tended to concentrate on descriptions of linguistic variation, particularly lexis and phonology, and linguistic atlases were compiled to show the distribution of different dialect forms. The purpose of this research was to counter the mainstream view in linguistics that without exception all sound change was regular. Dialectologists aimed to show that linguistic change, far from being regular, was in fact the opposite and that not all sounds and/or words were affected equally. They were particularly interested in lexical variation, and how different words were used to refer to the same thing in different places. They investigated this by going out and collecting examples of speech (known as **data**) from people (**informants**) in the regions in which they were interested, a process known as **fieldwork**.

One such study was the *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton, 1962). The impetus for Orton's survey, in addition to the reasons cited above, was his fear that as agriculture was rapidly becoming mechanized the lexical items associated with rural life would die out, and he wanted to capture them before they did so. The fieldwork was conducted during the 1950s and 1960s in over 300 rural communities throughout England. About 1,000 men were interviewed. The selection criteria were that the informants should be aged 60 or over, have little or no formal education, and had remained in the area in which they had been born. Such people were most likely to be still speaking dialects that had escaped the influence of standardisation and thus still bore a resemblance to the Middle English dialects described in Section 1.3.2 above. In this regard Orton's survey was intended to serve as a resource for linguistic historians to investigate the phonology, lexis and syntax of Medieval English. It has since been drawn upon to reconstruct the English spoken at the times of Shakespeare, Chaucer and even earlier.

However the ways in which data was collected provoked severe criticism in terms of the methodology and the **sampling**; that is, factors such as the age, social class, geographical location, gender and ethnicity of the informants from whom the data was gathered. The main data-gathering method was a long questionnaire, usually with one-word answers to questions such as 'You sweeten your tea with . . . ?'. The answers were then transcribed phonetically by the survey worker. Critics argued that one-word answers were too divorced from everyday use to provide an accurate account of how people actually used language. They also took issue with the sampling, arguing that dialectology should not restrict itself to people who were old, rural and male, but should also consider young men and women, and people from urban as well as rural areas. As a result traditional dialectologists changed both their methods and their samples accordingly.

The invention firstly of sound recording and portable tape recorders, and more recently video recorders, digitisation and computer technology, has revolutionised research into dialectology. Most books now published on the topic are accompanied by a CD or references to websites and electronic databases. One survey that has benefited from the more interactive techniques of data gathering is the Survey of Regional English, based at the University of Leeds. This also became part of a large web-based project called *Voices*, sponsored by the BBC (see Section 1.3.1 above). Data collected as part of the *Voices* project revealed ten alternatives to the term 'to play truant': *skive*, *bunk off*, *wag*, *skip*, *mitch*, *dog*, *hookey*, *twag*, *sag* and *nick off*. Although most of these terms can be found across the United Kingdom, *twag* is specific to Hull and Doncaster in the North East of England, *cap* to Derby and Nottingham in the Midlands, and *skidge* to Paisley in Northern Ireland.

In addition to lexical variation, dialectologists are also concerned with phonological variation. The methods of data collection and sampling used for this are the same as for lexical variation, but the focus of analysis is sounds rather than words. The basic conceptual tool here is the **linguistic variable**, meaning a linguistic item that has identifiable variants. There are at least two kinds of variation. The first is where the variation results in the use of a distinct phoneme of the language. For example words such as *laughing* and *going* can be pronounced as *laughin'* and *goin'*. The final sound of these two words is the linguistic variable 'ng' the two variants being [ŋ] in *laughing* and [n] in *goin*'. Another example is provided by the words *car* and *farm*, which can be be given r-less pronunciations: [kɑː] and [fɑːm]. Here the linguistic variable 'r' has the variants [r] as in *car* and ø (i.e. not pronounced) as in *fahm* (see also Section 1.4.2 below). The second kind of variation is more subtle, for example involving the nasalisation of vowels. For example the vowel in *bend* is sometimes nasalized and sometimes not. The degree of nasalisation can vary greatly (see also Section 1.5; and Jeffries, 2006, ch. 3).

Linguistic variables have also been used when studying grammatical variation. For example the presence or absence of 's' in the third person singular, as in *she goes* or *she go*; the form of the verb *be* in sentences such as *she's glad*, *she be glad* and *she glad*; and multiple negation, such as *he don't mean to hurt nobody* and *I done nothing* (see Section 1.4.3 below).

In sociolinguistic research that focuses on phonology, one sound is selected as the linguistic variable; that is, the sound against which other sounds are measured. Other variables, such as social class, age, gender, region and ethnic group, are the social variables; that is, the variant is compared for each of these variables. This enables comparison of the speech of older informants and younger ones, men and women, lower class and upper class, and so on.

Sound recording has made it possible to investigate patterns of stress and tone, known as **prosodic features**, in addition to those of sound when studying speech. English accents vary tremendously in this respect. As Wells (1999) points out, in many Northern English dialects vowels tend not to be reduced in unstressed Latinate prefixes (for example *con-* and *ex-*), unlike in RP and other Southern-based varieties. Although relatively little research has been conducted on dialect intonation, Wells notes that certain British accents – including those of Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow – tend to have rising tones where most other accents have falling ones. According to Biddulph (1986) West Midland speech characteristically has terminal rises in statements, and negative verbs (such as <wor> – *wasn't/weren't*) have a markedly high tone. Wells (1999) also points out that West Midlands working-class accents (as well as those of Liverpool and some in New York) have a **velarised** voice quality; that is, articulation takes place further back and higher on the tongue than is the case with other accents.

1.4.2 Social variation

During the latter half of the twentieth century linguists turned their attention to the relationship between language and social class, particularly in respect of accent variation. One of the first to do so was the American linguist William Labov (1966) who used linguistic variables to investigate differences between accents. One very noticeable linguistic variable is rhoticity. This refers to the pronunciation of 'r' when it occurs after a vowel – as in *bar, sort, churn* – and is usually known as the 'postvocalic r'. How 'r' is pronounced after vowels differs across the English-speaking world. For example RP is 'r-less' or non-rhotic, whilst Scots English and Cornish are 'r-ful' or rhotic. In the British Isles rhoticity differentiates Scottish, Irish, Cornish, West Country, rural East Anglian and Northumbrian accents from most Midland and southern accents. It is regarded as a low-prestige feature and is associated with 'backward' rural areas, whereas in most of the United States, rhoticity is prestigious and its absence is stigmatised.

Labov's (1966) study was based on the hypothesis that if speakers were ranked according to social class, then they could also be ranked in the same order by differences in the use of certain linguistic variables. One of these was the variable 'r' after vowels in words such as *lark* and *bar*. Labov wished to demonstrate that variations in New York accents centred on the use of the postvocalic 'r'. Before embarking on a large-scale survey Labov conducted a pilot study; that is, a much smaller survey to test the reliability of his research methods. He selected three department stores in Manhattan where the sales assistants' accents were likely to reflect those of their typical customers. This, he believed, could be extrapolated to categorise patterns of variation across the city. The three stores were Saks's Fifth Avenue, an expensive high-status store, Macy's, which was regarded as middle-class and middle-priced, and Klein's, which sold cheaper items and catered to poorer customers. Pretending to be a customer, Labov checked what items were for sale on the fourth floor of each store and then asked sales assistants on other floors for the whereabouts of the selected items. He chose that particular floor because 'fourth floor' contained two instances or 'tokens' of postvocalic [r]. Having asked his question, for example 'Excuse me, where are the women's shoes?', he listened to the answer and then pretended to be hard of hearing, uttering a further 'Excuse me?'. In this way he obtained two more tokens presented in a careful, stressed way as the sales person repeated 'fourth floor'. Next he repeated the exercise on the fourth floor itself by saying to sales assistants, 'Excuse me, which floor is this?'

Once Labov had received his answers he quickly moved out of sight and wrote down the pronunciation and details such as the gender, race and approximate age of the assistant. As all three department stores were very large he was able to gather data from 264 unsuspecting subjects. Multiplied by four tokens per informant, this gave a total of over 1000 tokens. Analysis of the data confirmed Labov's hypothesis and showed that use of the postvocalic 'r' varied according to the speech style, social class and linguistic context associated with each store. Sixty-two per cent of the subjects at Saks, 51 per cent at Macy's and 20 per cent at Klein's pronounced [r] in at least one of the four tokens. All groups increased their use of [r] in the more deliberate repetition, and interestingly it was the employees at Macy's, the middle-class store, who exhibited the greatest increase. As Labov (1972, p. 52) later commented: 'It would seem that *r*-pronunication is the norm at which a majority of Macy's employees aim, yet not the one they use most often.' On the quieter and often more expensive upper floors of Saks, the highest-ranking store, the percentage of pronounced [r] was much greater than on the much busier ground floor.

Labov's pilot study showed that 'r' could be studied systematically. In the large survey that followed a more representative sample of informants was used and the sampling procedure was similar to that employed in sociological surveys. He divided his informants into six groups, principally on the basis of age and socioeconomic class. His findings confirmed those of the pilot study in that the upper-class informants pronounced the postvocalic 'r' most consistently and lower-class informants pronounced it least. In New York the postvocalic 'r' was associated with high status and prestige. He argued that his findings showed that a language change was in progress, in that pronunciation of the postvocalic 'r' was spreading. According to Labov it was lower-class women who were responsible for diffusing of the [r] pronunciation in the community as they were particularly conscious of its prestige value.

Meanwhile lower middle-class speakers, when speaking more formally, exhibited the phenomenon known as hypercorrection (see Section 1.3.2). These speakers' pronunciation of [r] went beyond that of the high-status group, and this could be attributed to their wish to distance themselves from the working class and to become more like the upper class.

Trudgill (1974) replicated Labov's methodology when conducting a study of non-standard variants in the city of Norwich in the East of England. Like Labov, Trudgill aimed to ascertain the norms in the city by means of detailed interviews with a representative sample of the population, in this case 50 adults and 10 schoolchildren. He analysed several linguistic variables of grammar and accent. For example in Norwich, as in other parts of England, there are two alternative forms of the third person singular in the present tense: the standard English *she runs*, *walks*, *skips* and so on, and the local dialect form without the *-s* inflection: *she run*, *walk*, *skip* and so on. Trudgill found that there was a correlation between social class and the use of this variable. His findings for all variables confirmed those of Labov, in that members of the lower working class used them the most often and that the lower middle class produced relatively more of the prestigious forms than did the members of the social group immediately above them on the social scale.

Like Labov, Trudgill distinguished between **overt** and **covert prestige**. The issue of prestige is an important but complicated one in sociolinguistics. **Overt prestige** refers to the positive or negative assessment of variants or a speech variety in accordance with the dominant norms of educational institutions, public media and upper middle-class speech. In Labov's New York study the informants who exhibited the greatest use of stigmatised forms had the greatest tendency to stigmatise others for their use of the same form. However the working-class informants did not adopt middle-class norms, and this calls for explanations other than those associated with prestige. **Covert prestige** refers to the set of opposing values implicit in lower- and working-class lifestyles that do not appear in conventional subject-reaction tests. Working-class speech is thus seen as a mechanism for signalling adherences to local norms and values, whereas middle-class speech reveals a concern for social status and is therefore a mechanism for class solidarity.

Trudgill investigated gender as well as age and social class, and found that gender was a significant factor in the use of variant forms. In each social group the female informants consistently used fewer of the non-standard variations than men. They also had a tendency to over-report their use of prestige forms whilst male informants were more likely to under-report them. Women in Norwich seemed to be more influenced by the overt prestige of the standard variety, while men seemed to be more influenced by the covert prestige of the localised Norwich variety. Thus whilst Labov's study revealed clear social stratification by status in New York in respect of the variable (r), Trudgill's study highlighted the difference that gender made in adherence to a local variant. The covert prestige of the vernacular therefore counterbalanced the overt prestige of the standard variety. However, account has to be taken of the fact that Trudgill categorised women by their husband's social class, for which he has rightly been criticised. He concluded that the differences in attitude in the two countries reflected differences in class consciousness at the time, particularly the lack of any militant class-consciousness in the United States, unlike in the United Kingdom, and the relative lack of 'embourgeoisement' of the British working class.

1.4.3 Variation and social networks

In the late twentieth century the studies of urban dialectology by linguists such as Labov and Trudgill were challenged by L. and J. Milroy (Milroy, 1987; Milroy, 1992), who took issue with the notion of linguistic variables and variation theory in general. A study they conducted in Belfast led them to conclude that the relationship between linguistic and social structures was not necessarily best examined by exploring only social variables such as age and class. Instead they based their research on the notion of **social networks**. Rather than grouping speakers into predetermined categories such as social class, they situated individuals within the sum of their relationships, both formal and informal: relationships with family, friends and work colleagues, neighbourhood relationships and relationships based on ethnicity. They found that particular kinds of network would either inhibit or advance linguistic variation in a community.

For example men in the Ballymacarett district of Belfast who worked in the local shipyard and had dense social networks bound by strong ties were likely to conform to the prevailing linguistic norms and were less likely to tolerate or encourage change. This differed from the women of the district who often had jobs outside the area and had fewer local ties. This led the Milroys to conclude that dense networks acted as brakes on linguistic innovation, whilst weak ties between individuals facilitated the spread of linguistic innovations – such as new pronunciations and new words – from network to network.

They argued that peripheral members of a community who had ties with other communities (through work, education or friends) carried innovations into a community. Their conclusions complemented Labov's argument about change, but provided far more information about the site and possible explanations of change.

Virtually all of the work undertaken in social and urban dialectology until that point had concentrated on variations in phonology. Milroy and Milroy (1993) sought to redress this. The aim of their book was to raise the status of English regional dialects and draw attention to their syntactic and morphological characteristics. To give a morphological example, in standard English the past tense forms of *break* and *knew* have been codified as *broke* and *know*. Verb forms such as *breaked* and *knowed* were part of the English language for centuries and are still present in regional dialects today, but since they were not chosen for standard English they are no longer used in writing or 'educated speech'. A syntactic example is multiple negation: *she never said nothing*. This was outlawed by nineteenth-century prescriptive grammarians but was common in the Middle English of Chaucer's time, was used by Shakespeare and continues to be used by native speakers of English today as it remains a grammatical feature of some dialects.

In some English dialects *thee*, *thy* and *thou* are still used instead of *you*. Other dialects retain forms of the verb *be* that differ from those in standard English, including the Black Country dialect in the Midlands towns of Wolverhampton, Dudley and Walsall. For example in the affirmative present tense there are:

I am (am)	I am (am)
you/thou am (y'am)	you are
s/he is	s/he is
we am	we are
you am (Y'am)	you are

Such variations, because of their considerable divergence from standard English grammar, have been interpreted as signs of ignorance and lack of intelligence, and viewed as a bastardised form of English.This attitude can be attributed to the way in which British English was standardised, as summarized in Section 1.3.2 above. However the Black Country dialect, far from being a bastardised form of English, has a pedigree that dates back to the West Midland dialect in the Middle English period. The Black Country dialect is also noted for its highly contracted negative modal forms, including *ain't* (*am not/isn't/aren't*, *hasn't/haven't*) and *doe/doh/dow* (*doesn' t/don't*) (see Clark, 2004).

An on-going investigation of the Black Country variety (Clark, forthcoming) has revealed that the syntactic forms discussed above are all still widely used by men and women from all social backgrounds and age groups, particularly when talking to friends and relatives. This is the case even for people with a higher education. On the whole, however, Black Country grammatical forms are most prevalent amongst people aged 50 and over. Younger people, especially adolescents and those 20–30, tend to use them less, and then mostly the verb 'be' in its various tenses and its negative form. The use of dialect amongst adolescents has been the focus of a number of studies, including Eckert (1988, 1989) and Kerswill and Williams (2000, 2002). Eckert suggests that American adolescents are linguistically the most innovative of all generations, and that through their peer groups they establish new norms that may diffuse into the wider community.

Kerswill and Williams investigated the role of adolescents in **dialect levelling** in three English towns: two in the south (Reading and Milton Keynes) and one in the north (Hull). Dialect levelling is a term used to describe changes in dialects that make them considerably more like standard English in terms of phonology, grammar and vocabulary. Kerswill and Williams examined phonological and grammatical variables and compared males and females, teenage and elderly subjects, in the middle and working classes. In the case of phonological features they found convergence between the two southern towns, but convergence between the southern towns and the northern one was limited to some consonantal features (see also Section 1.4.1 above). They also tested the Milroys' claim (Milroy, 1987; Milroy, 1992) that network characteristics rather than class accounted for the more levelled, standard speech of the middle classes compared with the working class. They found that, whilst the working-class speakers in Milton Keynes were more linguistically levelled than their Reading counterparts, they remained strongly non-standard and non-RP in terms of grammar and pronunciation. This was ascribed to a lack of social (as opposed to geographical) mobility and to the maintenance of class-based cultural differences concerning relationships with schools, attitudes to literacy, the authorities and employers.

In the same study Kerswill and Williams also investigated adolescents' attitudes towards language and social groups. They found that when discussing aspects of teenage culture, questions about language evoked the strongest response. The adolescents expressed a strong allegiance to their own peer group, framed in terms of in-group and out-group, and usually with reference to a hierarchical class structure. There was often a discrepancy between what adolescents said about the way they spoke and how they actually spoke. This led Kerswill and Williams to conclude that the adolescents were partly but not fully aware of the process of language change. However there was uniformity in attitudes towards language issues in both northern and southern schools, suggesting that part of the mechanism of levelling lay in these subjective parameters.

What all the studies summarised in this section show is that variation in language use and the process of language change are inextricably bound up with class, gender, age and culture. The study of variation and change, then, involves not only linguistic description but also consideration of social and cultural factors.

1.5 Studying variation in English

The earlier sections of this chapter introduced the issues involved in studying variation and change in the English language. As they have shown, research into linguistic variation focuses on differences in the production of language in terms of pronunciation, accent, vocabulary and grammar. Research into language change is normally cross-generational. An associated area of research is attitudes towards variation.

A purely linguistic description of variations does not explain why variations occur. To investigate why they do it is necessary to consider non-linguistic variables that derive from the social context or networks within which linguistic variations take place. A **variable** is a feature that has a number of possible values, or in the case of linguistic variables we might say that they have a number of potential 'realisations'. Thus the phoneme /t/ can be said to have a number of possible variants (or allophones), including [t], [t^h], [t̪] and [ʔ] (glottal stop). (See Jeffries, 2006, ch. 2 for further information on phonological variation.) Any investigation of the variable 't', therefore, will involve collecting examples of different /t/ phonemes and looking for patterns in the occurrence of variants, perhaps in relation to syllable structure, word structure or, in the case of glottal stop, the formality of the setting or the class of the speaker. In the case of non-linguistic or social variables, the variants will be related to the social class to which the informants belong, their age, geographical origins and so on. Thus the variable will be known by its generic name, such as 'social class' and the variants will be lower-middle class, upper-working class and so on. Much of the discussion and advice that follows will refer to linguistic and non-linguistic variables in the sense just defined.

1.5.1 Selecting a topic for research

The first thing to decide is the topic you wish to address in your research. For example you may wish to investigate variation:

- In a particular geographical area.
- in a particular ethnic group.

- Between two neighbouring areas.
- Across different age groups.
- Across social classes.
- Across different ethnic groups.
- About the same person in different social settings.
- About attitudes towards variation.

The next thing to decide is the focus of your research.

- Investigating variations in a particular geographical area will require you to select the area for your study, decide upon the linguistic variables you wish to investigate, and select the non-linguistic variables for your sample of informants (see Section 1.5.2 below).
- Investigating variations between neighbouring areas will require you to do the same as above but two areas are chosen instead of one. These could be two neighbouring villages or two neighbouring urban suburbs.
- Investigating variations in an ethnic group will require you to select the group you wish to study. If you want to add a social dimension you will need to choose a setting, for example a domestic household or a workplace. You could then investigate the impact that location has on language use.
- Investigating variations across age groups, genders, social classes and/or ethnic groups will require you to decide how to restrict the non-linguistic variables to make the project manageable and the results clear. Investigating variations across age groups, particularly if the ages range from the very old to the very young, will enable you to identify language change over the span of half a century or more.
- Investigating attitudes towards variation should not be confused with investigating linguistic variation itself, since how people think they speak and how they actually speak can be very different. Such studies are best undertaken by means of a questionnaire that includes dialect recognition as part of its design, or as a separate element (see Sections 1.4 3 and 1.5.3).

For all the above examples except the last, and for any study of linguistic variation, once you have decided on the topic and its focus and scope, the next step is to decide which linguistic and non-linguistic variables to investigate.

If you choose to investigate phonological or grammatical variations you will have to decide whether to choose specific variables in advance or select variables that emerge naturally from the data you collect later. Investigating lexical variations will require questions on topics that are most likely to reveal such variations, for example food and drink, or word lists.

Non-linguistic variables include geographical origin, age, gender, social class, ethnicity and so on. Here you have to give thought to the extent to which to control for the chosen variable. For example choosing informants who are of a similar age, live in the same geographical location or are the same gender means that these variables are held constant, allowing you to focus on whichever variable you are investigating. The extent to which you control for the non-linguistic variables will also depend on the scope of your study. If your study is restricted to just one age it will be difficult to identify what is specific to that age group because there will be nothing to compare the results with, so it is best to have informants of different ages. From a practical point of view, however, it is not sensible to investigate variations across age groups if you do not know sufficient people from one of the age groups in question. Equally, if you select gender as one of your non-linguistic variables then you must know enough people of both genders who would be willing to act as informants. If your study relates to a geographical area you need to decide on the extent of that area, its boundaries and ease of access to it. Undertaking fieldwork is fraught enough with pitfalls, you do not need the added complication of setting yourself unrealistic or overambitious parameters (see the discussion on sampling in Section 1.5.2 below). For this reason, and to avoid having to carry out overly complex statistical tests, the topics suggested below involve just one or two non-linguistic variables.

The next step is to design your project and collect the data required for your analysis.

1.5.2 Project design and sampling

Your project should be carefully designed to reflect your research question and will be either a quantitative or a qualitative study. The former is aimed at quantifying the number of variants of a linguistic variable, and sometimes the results are plotted against those for non-linguistic variables. A qualitative study considers the nature of linguistic features in context, and normally explores a text or set of texts in more depth, often considering a range of variables rather than restricting the study to a narrow selection.

For example a quantitative study could be an investigation of h-dropping by different generations of Londoners, with data being obtained from a roughly equal number of informants within a set of predetermined age ranges, those shown in Table 1.2.

We shall look a little later at the tasks involved in analysing the data obtained for a project such as this. First we shall consider a typical qualitative research project in order for the distinction between the two to be made clear. Whilst the h-dropping project focuses on a single variable, in this case the pronunciation (or dropping) of the glottal fricative /h/, a qualitative project

Table 1.2 Suggested age ranges and sample size for a quantitative study

	18–27	35–44	52–60	70+
Number of informants:	20	18	22	16

could be to look more broadly at the phonology of speakers who share a similar background, such as geographical or ethnic origin. This will require more extensive data than that gathered to examine a single variable, as in the case of the h-dropping study.

The precise nature of the data collected is not entirely determined by whether the study is quantitative or qualitative, though it is common to use different methods of data collection to produce statistical or contextual results. We shall consider this in the next section. Here we shall examine the principles of choosing informants for a study, and their geographical location.

Choosing informants is known as **sampling**. there are three kinds of sampling: **random**, **structured** and **opportunistic**. If you wish to identify the pattern of linguistic usage by a particular group, for example the morphology of New Yorkers' speech, you may decide to use random sampling to acquire your set of informants. Here the term 'random' is a very precise and technical and does not relate to the colloquial use of the word to indicate an accidental set of occurrences or items. The random sample in this more technical sense refers to a set of informants who have been chosen from a well-defined population by means of random number tables or computer-generated random numbers. For the above project, then, the population would be the entire population of the city of New York. In order to be sure that your sample was representative you would need to choose people from the electoral register, the phone book or some other comprehensive list, using random numbers based on the total population to make sure that all the variations in speech are likely to be represented in the sample. You will appreciate that this is not an easy route to take, and you also have to build in factors such as the reluctance of some people to take part in surveys and interviews. If you decide on a much smaller population – such as all students in the first year of a university course – you will have to take care not to skew the results in favour of people who you know, because it is unlikely that they will be representative of the whole population.

Although random sampling is the most reliable method of obtaining a representative sample, there is another kind of sampling technique that is suitable for studies of variation, particularly when you wish to compare linguistic usage by informants of different ages, social classes or ethnic or geograph-

Table 1.3 Suggested age ranges and sample size for a quantitative study with two variables

	18–27	35–44	52–60	70+
Number of male informants	20	18	22	16
Number of female informants	22	16	20	18

ical origins. This is known as structured sampling, and it is used to create a balanced sample by using non-linguistic variables to define the different groups of informants. Thus you may decide to investigate dialect words for small types of bread. Among the many possible variants in British English are *bap*, *roll*, *breadcake*, *teacake* and *barmcake*. In order to establish whether there are regional differences you might decide to examine samples of people in cities located in each of the regions of England – for example Bristol, London, Leicester, Wolverhampton, Newcastle and Manchester. Whilst in an ideal world the informants will be chosen by random sampling, the enormity of the task often precludes this. The easier option is structured sampling. With this it is essential to ensure that the different categories of informant are able to be compared, which requires there to be at least five informants, and preferably more, in each group. To return to the h-dropping project discussed earlier, there is a minimum of 16 in each of the categories and the results are therefore comparable. If we were to add another social variable, for example gender, to see whether h-dropping is more marked in men than in women, this would double the number of informants required (Table 1.3).

An issue that arises when more than one variable is considered is the difficulty of analysing the results. For quantitative projects you would have to perform some fairly sophisticated (multivariate) statistical tests on the data, so it is recommended that you read up on some of the basic principles (for example Woods *et al.*, 1986; see also Section 1.6 below).

The final form of sampling is opportunistic sampling, which involves collecting data from friends, relatives and others with whom you are in contact. This method is fine as long as you are not going to make generalised claims for your findings, as you would with quantitative research.

1.5.3 Methods of data collection

A very common way of collecting quantitative data is to conduct a survey by means of a questionnaire, copies of which can be sent to a large number of people. Making tape recordings of interviews and transcribing them according to pre-established dependent variables is a particularly good quantitative method if you are investigating phonological variables. For example in the study by Kerswill and Williams (2002) summarised in Section 1.5.3 above, 100 adolescents at two secondary schools in each of the three towns in question were tape recorded. The resultant data were compared with those from recordings of four to six elderly working-class participants in each area who had lived in that area since birth, plus data from the SED (see 1.4.2 above).

Qualitative studies are more in-depth and data are normally gathered from a small sample. The most usual means of data collection are interviews, usually taped. In Clark's (2004) study of phonology in the West Midlands of England, five informants were tape recorded and the resultant data were compared with previously published findings, including those by Wells (1999) and Biddulph (1986). Comparisons of this kind add a limited quantitative dimension to a study.

Whereas questionnaires can be sent out to a large number of people, by their very nature interviews are time-consuming and most researchers do not have the time or the resources to conduct a large number of interviews. However talking to people face to face allows a flexibility that is not possible with questionnaires. Therefore it is often useful to send a questionnaire to say, ten informants and then follow this up by interviewing five of them. Both of these methods are qualitative in this case.

As indicated above, the choice of whether to conduct a quantitative or a qualitative study depends very much on your aim. If your aim is to investigate phonological variations between towns (as in Kerswill, 2004) or across the British Isles (Widdowson and Upton, 2006), or grammatical variations across the British Isles (Cheshire, 1993), then a quantitative method is probably best. Equally if the study involves attitudes towards variation then the more informants the better and a questionnaire is appropriate. For example one of my students undertook a study of employers' attitudes towards local accents. She sent questionnaires to the personnel departments of ten national call centres to find out what account was taken of regional accents when engaging employees.

If the aim is to undertake an in-depth study of linguistic variations in a specific geographical location, then a qualitative method is appropriate. Kortmann and Schneider's (2004) study looks at linguistic variations across the world, but each chapter investigates a specific locality and in most cases the methods used were qualitative. For example a local brewery requested that research be undertaken into lexical variations of words to do with beer and drinking that could be used in an advertising campaign targeted at men. The people in charge of the campaign wanted to be sure that the dialect words and phrases they used were not only authentic but also conformed to dialect spelling. This project involved students interviewing and recording men in local pubs about their drinking habits.

The methods of data collection you choose, then, will depend on your research question and the focus of your study. Structured sampling can be used in qualitative studies, although the size and range of the sample may not be sufficient to obtain worthwhile statistical results. For example in one qualitative study of phonological variations between different ethnic groups for both genders in a specific geographical location there were only five informants in total, which is normally the minimum number required for each category for the purposes of comparison. Here, there were two non-linguistic variables: gender and ethnicity. It is sensible to restrict the non-linguistic variables in a qualitative study of this kind to a maximum of two since this makes the focus of the study clear. When there is a small range of informants too many non-linguistic variables would make it impossible to draw any worthwhile conclusions.

Whether the sample is random or structured it is important to bear in mind that just a few interviews will not provide enough data from which to draw general conclusions about social variability. Any conclusions that were drawn would have to be backed up by a larger study in order for them to be considered valid. In the study of dialect words and phrases for beer and drinking mentioned earlier the students interviewed the informants in pairs, and each pair of students interviewed five informants. The data so obtained provided information on lexis, grammar and pronunciation, but the data gathered by each individual pair was not sufficient to draw conclusions about social networks or social class. However the combined data gathered by the 10 pairs of students, involving 10 interviews and 50 informants analysed and conclusions about social variability to be drawn. In another study a doctoral research student investigating variations in register, in which social variation was also a factor, recorded 40 children aged 8–12 in six primary schools. The data collection for this study took 18 months, whereas that by the pairs of students took two weeks. Time factors such as this should also be considered when designing your study.

It is important to obtain biographical details of each of the informants as these details are crucial sources of contextual information. This information should include not only standard items such as name, age and address but also factors that may have a bearing on language use, for example level of education, length of time spent in the locality, and the birth place of parents or even grandparents. The best way of obtaining this information is to draw up a biographical questionnaire covering all the items you wish to be informed about and ask the informants to complete it at the beginning or end of the interview. The advantage of this is that you have a written record to which you can easily refer. The alternative is to ask for the information at the start of the interview by way of an ice-breaker, although this will involve you in additional transcription after the event. Note that the storage of personal details of this kind is subject to the Data Protection Act in Britain.

Once you have established your variables and chosen your sample, then you need to collect your data, as discussed below.

1.5.3.1 Questionnaires

Sufficient questionnaires should be issued to ensure an adequate return that is going to be of any use. As a rough guide, expect a fifty percent return. People do not return questionnaires they are sent for a number of reasons, including lack of time or lack of interest. This means that to obtain ten completed questionnaires, you will need to send out twenty.

A written questionnaire can be used as the main means of data collection when investigating grammar, lexis or attitudes towards language use, though it should be remembered that written English tends to be more formal than spoken English, and therefore a questionnaire may be of limited use if you are trying to obtain information on spoken grammar or informal lexis. When designing a questionnaire, make sure that you are clear about the kinds of questions you want to ask. **Closed questions** require just a yes or no answer; semi-open or **multiple choice questions** allow informants to choose from a restricted list of options; and **open questions** invite informants to give their own answers. For example an investigation of grammatical variation may include a question such as *Do you ever say 'I don't know nothing'*? This question invites a *yes* or *no* answer, and is therefore a closed question. A drawback with this is that while a 'yes' answer will provide information on informants who use this expression, a 'no' answer does not allow for identification of other non-standard negative constructions such as '*I know nothing'*. Therefore a multiple choice question would be more useful for discovering usage in this area. The question could be *Tick the following expressions you are most likely to use*, followed by a list of negative constructions. Also include a final category of 'Other' to capture anything you have not thought of. An open question would invite informants to give their own categories and descriptions such as: *How do you say 'no' to something?* It is important to avoid leading questions that invite a specific response. For example asking '*Do you think the Queen speaks good English?*' is more likely than not to be answered 'yes'. Note that non-standard grammatical constructions may be avoided by respondents who are anxious to be on their 'best' linguistic behaviour.

It is a good idea to have a mixture of all three kinds of questions since it is very difficult if not impossible to predict all possible answers to a closed or multiple-choice question. The amount of time it will take to process the questionnaire should also be taken into account. Although closed questions limit the number of answers they are the quickest to process since all they require is adding up the responses to each option. Open questions require more time as every answer might be different.

Once you have designed your questionnaire you should conduct a pilot survey before distributing it. That is, try it out on a few people to make sure that the questions are clear and elicit the information you want. Any questions that are regularly misunderstood, do not produce the required information or lead the informants more than expected should be redesigned and piloted again.

1.5.3.2 Recordings

If you are investigating spoken language you may wish to use recorded voices as your main form of data. This choice, unless you have a great deal of money and many research assistants to help, will make your project qualitative in nature. If sufficient resources are available it is possible to record a large number of informants in the way described below.

To generate sufficient data for analysis you need to record each informant for up to one hour, depending on the focus of your research. The recording can be of:

- The informant reading word lists or passages aloud.
- An interview between you and the informant.
- A conversation between informants.
- A conversation about written questions or another form of written data such as a spidergram (see Section 1.5.4 below).

The reading aloud method restricts you to identifying phonological variables, and the more formal nature of written passages may alter the informants natural speech. Even so the reading of a passage allows you to test, for example, the pronunciation of /t/ in different contexts, including syllable-final glottal stops. If the data obtained in this way are compared with readings from a word list, which is more formal still, this can give an idea of variations according to social context. Usually reading aloud is accompanied by another method of data collection that produces more naturally occurring speech, such as recorded interviews.

Interviews fall into one of three categories: structured, semistructured and unstructured or open. In **structured interviews** a list of questions is prepared in advance and all the informants are asked the same questions in the same order. No additional or supplementary questions are asked. In **semistructured interviews** most of the preprepared questions are the same and asked in the same order, but additional or supplementary questions are added. In **unstructured interviews** no questions are set in advance and the interview becomes a conversation that can go in any direction. A **structured** interview may have, say, five questions. For example the study undertaken on behalf of the local brewery discussed above consisted of structured interviews. All the informants were asked the following questions in the same order. *Is this your local? What beer do you drink? How does x beer compare with others? What words or phrases do you associate with drinking beer? With drinking x?* The advantage of this method, particularly if you are interviewing a large number of informants, is that comparing the data during the analysis is straightforward. The disadvantage is that it does not allow for any interesting answers to be developed or pursued.

A **semistructured interview** will have say, three main questions plus supplementary questions to draw out further information. For example the main questions could be *Do you go to the cinema often? What was the last film you saw? What is your favourite film?* Each of these questions could be followed by ones such as *Do you go locally or elsewhere?, Do you enjoy films by that director?,* and so on. The advantage of this kind of interview is that it allows a discussion to develop, but it does make the data analysis more time-consuming.

Because **unstructured interviews** have no predetermined questions the discussion can be more free-flowing and the repondents' speech may be more natural. However should the conversation dry up the interviewer may have no resources to turn to and the data generated might not have sufficiently similar items or topics to enable comparison. For occasions of this kind, it is a good idea to have some questions ready such as *when did you last go on holiday?*

For the purposes of sociolinguistic research, and depending on your research question, a semi-structured interview is preferable. It enables you to ensure that the variables you are investigating, particularly phonological ones, are covered by your questions and that the answers will be comparable. The supplementary questions will enable you to cover ground that the informants do not volunteer, and to ensure that all the informants discuss roughly the same topic. Whatever method of data collection you choose, that choice should always be justified in the write-up.

Recording and talking about speech tends to make people conscious of what they are saying and how they are saying it, thus giving rise to a phenomenon called **the observer's paradox** (Labov, 1966). This refers to the fact that it is impossible to observe someone 'behaving naturally' without affecting what they do or how they do it. Informants' speech can be affected in two ways. First, an interview situation brings with it a certain degree of formality and this affects speakers' use of language. Second, if the topic of conversation is the informants' speech they are even more likely to formalise what they say. For this reason you need to think very carefully about the questions you are going to ask. Questions that take their attention away from speech and on to other topics is always a good idea, such as Labov's (1972) 'danger of death' question: *Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger?* Another way of minimising the observer's paradox is to interview informants in pairs. This may take the focus of attention away from you as the interviewer and allow for a more varied dialogue.

People's attitudes towards language use is a particularly problematic topic to study, not least because people's perception of how they or others speak is often at odds with the actual speech (see Kerswill and Williams 2002). Hence it is difficult to assess the reliability of a person's judgement without recourse to other evidence, such as a dialect recognition experiment (ibid.). This involves playing taped samples of speech and asking the informants to identify their own community dialect. An experiment of this kind can also be written rather than spoken. A study of attitudes works best if it has a clear focus, such as employers' attitude towards employing workers with a regional accent, as in the call centre example discussed earlier. In the interest of reliability, **triangulation** is often employed in data collection: that is, more than one method of data collection is used and the results are cross-referenced. Thus usage reported by informants can be compared with naturally occurring conversation (perhaps in response to the 'danger of death' question) so that the accuracy of self-reporting can be checked.

A final issue that must be considered before you begin to collect your data, especially tape recordings, is **ethics**. This includes the ways in which the data are collected and obtaining the informants' consent. If your main method of data collection is a questionnaire survey, then completing and returning a questionnaire means that the informant is happy for you to use the information provided. The situation is more complex when it comes to tape recording, which can be done in an **overt** or **covert** way. With **overt** recording the presence of the recorder is obvious, the informants are in no doubt that they are being recorded and have given their permission for it. If no permission is given, then no recording takes place. They are also fully aware of the reasons why they are being recorded and that the topic of the interview or conversation is the subject of the research.

Covert recording is when informants are recorded without their realising it or a reason other than the real one is given as to why the data are being collected. If you record informants without their knowledge you must obtain their permission afterwards if you are to use the data. One way to get around the problem and obtain permission is to give a false reason for the recording. For example you may wish to record the informants' speech in order to study phonological variation and its relation to social class or regional identity, but you tell them that you are conducting a survey of eating habits. Making the focus of the interview something other than the informants' use of language gives you a better chance of obtaining more naturally occurring data than would otherwise be the case. However the informant's ignorance of the real reason why they are being recorded remains an ethical consideration, so you should tell them after the recording has been completed and ask for their permission again. For full guidelines on good practice, see http://www.baal.org.uk/goodprac.pdf

1.5.4 Sound and video recording equipment

The equipment you use to record informants' speech could be a standard audio cassette recoder, an MP3 player, a camcorder, a laptop or a digital audio tape. When researching variations in English, and especially accents, sound recording is by far the most reliable source of data as it captures sounds as they actually are. Video recording gives an extra dimension since it captures the context in which naturally occurring language is used. However because the focus of research is usually the language itself and not, for example, body language or facial expression it is customary to use a sound recorder as the main method of data collection.

The kind of microphone you use is also important. Many cassette players have built-in microphones but the sound quality of the recording can be very poor, and for this reason it is best to have a separate, omni-directional microphone; that is, one that captures sound from all directions. Since an interview can take up to an hour it is best to place the microphone between you and the informant rather than to hold it, since holding a microphone can be not only obtrusive but also tiring. It should be positioned a little below the mouth level and be equidistant from roughly 30 centimetres either way – if it is too close the sound will be distorted. It is vital that you establish beforehand how the microphone works and if it is working properly, for example you should check whether you have plugged it into the correct socket on the tape recorder. You should also check for any peripheral noise, such as a fridge humming in the background, that might affect the recording.

Some recorders allow you to set a recording level to avoid distortion. There will be a meter that shows the level, plus a dial to adjust it. To set the level, ask your informants some simple questions such as *'What did you have for breakfast?'*, or *'Where did you go on holiday?'* whilst you adjust the setting. Some recorders offer level options such as 'high' or 'low'. Here you can ask your questions and then play back the tape to ascertain the right setting.

Another important factor to take into account is the location in which the recording is to take place. As the aim of the exercise is to record speech that is as close as possible to that used by the informants when the recorder is not there it must be a setting where they feel comfortable. For example it could be their own homes, a social setting such as a café, bar or pub, or, if you are investigating the speech of children, a playground at school or close to their homes. If you are investigating lexical variations of words to do with beer and drinking, the most logical setting is a pub. However you need to record at a time when the pub is not too noisy, or arrange with the landlord to have exclusive use of a room. Similarly if you wish to investigate phonological variations between people of different ages, then a family gathering or a social occasion such as a birthday party would be appropriate. It would need to be a small enough event to record individual conversations, but large enough to generate suitable data. You should also let your informants know how long the interview or recording will take, and agree a starting and ending time.

Depending on the focus of your study, your recording could be of a discussion of a document such as a spidergram. Here the informant is given a sheet of paper and asked to list alternative vocabulary items for certain groups of words. This can be given to each informant in advance to complete, with a subsequently recorded discussion of the items listed, or it can be completed as part of the interview. This technique would be a good one to use when interviewing people about drinking habits and beer. (For more information on this technique see www.bbc.co.uk/voices.)

For playing back and transcribing the recorded speech it is important to have a recorder that does the job you want it to do. One with a built-in counter and speed control is especially useful. The counter will let you pinpoint sections of speech, and a speed control will let you vary the playback speed of the recording, which is particularly useful when it comes to transcribing. The development of digital recording has allowed electronic resources such as sound files to be compiled. For example the Newcastle electronic corpus of Tyneside English (see: www.ncl.ac.uk/necte). includes sound files, orthographic and phonetic transcriptions and tagging.

When you are ready to start recording, then note the date, time and location of the recording on the tape itself and on a sheet of paper. Make sure your questions and any other material you may need are to hand, including follow-up questions in case the informant dries up or something unexpected happens. You should also bear in mind that conversation, and the circumstances in which it takes place, can be unpredictable. You have to be prepared to record more than once and for a longer time than you may have thought necessary in order to obtain sufficient data for analysis. It is always far better to have too much than too little.

1.5.5 Transcribing data

Once you have completed your recordings your next task is transcription. This is very time-consuming, and is best done with a playback device that lets you slow down the pace of the speech, as discussed above.

There are two types of transcription: **phonetic transcription** and **orthographic transcription**. Which one you use will depend on your research question. For example if you are conducting a phonological study you will need to transcribe phonetically using the international phonetic alphabet

(IPA – see Jeffries, 2006, ch. 1). The reason for using the IPA is that covers more sounds than the alphabet does, and can be used consistently to represent the same sounds, unlike the alphabet.

There are two types of phonetic transcription: **narrow transcription** and **broad transcription**. Narrow transcription gives precise details of sound and encodes information on the phonetic variations of specific allophones in an utterance. Broad transcription gives a basic idea of the sound and is usually a transcription of the phonemes of an utterance. Broad transcription is generally used in dialectology. For example:

Erm in about (. . .) erm twenty seven weeks I go away to Cuba
ɜːm ən əbæut ɜːm twenti sevən wiːks ə gəʊ əweɪ tə kjuːbə

for two weeks er ‘nd four days in Havana and ten days in a holiday
fə tuː wiːks ɜːnd fɔː deɪz ən həvænə ən ten deɪz ən æ hɒlɪdiː

Resort erm it’s cost about two thousand pounds for the two of us
rɪzɔːt ɜːm ɪts kɒst əbæut tuː θaʊsənd paʊndz fə ðe tuː əv ʌs

The above transcription was taken from a recording of an informant speaking in a Black Country accent (see Section 1.4.3 above). One of the characteristics of this accent is the presence of dipthongs such as [æʊ] (Mathison, 1999; Clark, 2004), and as Wells (1982) points out there is quite a degree of phonetic variation. These findings are represented in the transcript by æ in əbæut and the variation aʊ in θaʊsənd and paʊndz.

It is important to listen to a passage several times before beginning your transcription. This is because you must be absolutely sure that you know exactly what the speaker has said in order to transcribe it faithfully since you cannot, as in a written text, rely on a variety of interpretations.

For **orthographic** transcriptions the standard alphabet is used and what is said is written down verbatim (see Section 2.8.3). This is usually set out like a play script, with the speakers’ names on the left-hand side and the text of what they say next to their names. It is conventional not to use capital letters or punctuation in such transcriptions. It is important to transcribe all that you hear, including utterances not normally found in writing, such as *um*, *er* and so on, and to resist the temptation to turn what is said into grammatical and punctuated standard English.

Once you have decided which form of transcription to use you should select the parts you wish to transcribe. Bearing in mind that phonetic transcription takes longer than orthographic transcription – as a rule of thumb it takes between seven and ten hours to transcribe one hour of recording – it is practical to transcribe only the sections that are pertinent to your study. In this regard it is a good idea to have a list of related criteria when you make your selection. For example if you are analysing accent differences in a particular geographical area you should select the sections in which your informants are most at ease and are speaking naturally, which is likely to be when the interview or conversation has settled in, probably about ten minutes into the recording. If the focus of your study is lexis and/or grammar you may only need to transcribe short sections in which the relevant structures or lexical items are used.

1.5.6 Analysing data

Once you have transcribed your recordings the next step is to analyse them. The focus of your analysis will depend on the nature of your study, but it will almost certainly be on identifying regular differences in accent, vocabulary or grammar. If you have chosen to investigate grammar, vocabulary or attitudes towards language use then you may have other data to analyse, such as questionnaires.

Patterns of linguistic variation can be identified by comparing your data with standard English and RP. Here you will also have to take account of any non-linguistic variables you have included in your study – such as age, gender, social class or ethnicity – that may account for variations. Any conclusion you draw here will of necessity be tentative, since you cannot define which variable is responsible for a linguistic variation unless you are in a position to perform statistical tests on large amounts of quantitative data.

The following transcript is taken from a study of the Black Country dialect. The five (three female, two male) were white, British, informants aged between 40 and 50, had left school at the age of 15–16 and had no formal qualifications. The following features of non-standard grammar were identified:

J: *yeah, he got me a job 'cos I <u>wor</u>…well, I was working, but I changed jobs 'cos it was nearer, <u>worn</u> it?*

K: *and <u>her</u> came back Sunday*

M: *that's got to be our jodhpurs* ***<u>wot</u>*** *we make*

K: *and then <u>her come</u> back Sunday*

K: *<u>them</u> chickens*

J: *<u>Never</u> touched it*

K: *and the zip was <u>broke</u> so he says*

K: *was that one <u>yorn</u>?*

Table 1.4 Example of a transcript table

Feature	Example	Transcript and line
1. Dialect use of preterite <to be> <was> affirmative <were> negative	<was> <worn>	1.3, 1.4
2. Non-standard use of <her> would be <she> in SE	<her>	3.2, 3.3
3. <wot> for SE <that> (relative pronoun)	<what>	2.7
4. Preterite identical to present tense	<come>	3.3, 5.5
5. <them> for demonstrative <those>	<them>	4.1
6. <never> as past tense negator	<never>	5.10, 5.12
7. (adjectival) past participle identical to preterite: <broke> for SE <broken>	<broke>	2.6 (2.8)
8. <yorn> for SE <yours> (2nd person possessive pronoun	<yorn>	2.9

Once you have completed this part of the analysis the grammatical forms you have identified should be presented in a table like the one above. The first column describes the features identified in the Black Country tapes in grammatical terms, the second gives examples, and the third gives the first occurrence of each feature in the transcripts, with subsequent occurrences listed.

The next step is to identify grammatical features that are specific to a particular dialect and those which are present in non-standard dialects. For example the use of *yorn* the second person possessive pronoun (number 8 in the table) is a distinctive feature of the Black Country dialect, while the use of never (number 6) as a past tense negator and *broke* (number 7) as a past participle identical to a preterite can be found in several non-standard dialects.

Having analysed your data and drawn some conclusions you should look at some previously published studies of the same topic to see whether your data confirms or contradicts the findings in them.

If your study is of attitudes towards language use your analysis will focus on identifying these attitudes and perhaps where they came from. As discussed in Sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2, people's attitude towards language use, including prejudices against certain types of use, can be traced back to a time when people held very different beliefs about language from the ones linguists hold today, but which still persist. You may also wish to investigate the extent to which individuals choose a certain variety of English not only to express ideas but also to establish their own identity and distinguish themselves from other groups of people.

Your analysis of questionnaire data, if any, is likely to involve the production of numerical results if closed or multiple choice questions have been used. There are some simple statistical texts, such as the χ^2 test, that can quite quickly show whether raw scores and/or percentage scores are significantly different from each other.

1.5.7 Writing your report

The overall structure of your report will be different from that of a conventional essay. It should include the following elements:

- Presentation of your hypothesis or hypotheses. This will include a description of the issue(s) in question; the topics to be addressed; what your hypothesis is and why it matters; what type of data will be presented (phonological, lexical, syntactic or people's opinions); if appropriate, which variable(s) and variants of them have been used in the research; a description of the speech community examined; what type of analysis will be presented and, briefly, what conclusions you expect to draw. You should also locate this discussion in the context of previously published studies. This will allow you to set your hypothesis against the work of others and provide a context for it.
- Description of your methodology. Methodologies are normally drawn from certain methodological and analytical frameworks, and when applying them researchers make assumptions about theoretical issues. The description of your methodology should be detailed enough for others to be able to replicate your study, and it should include information about the following: the informants and investigators, and how many there were of each; an explanation of the methods used to locate informants and persuading them to participate; any criteria used for sampling; how the data were collected (for example questionnaires and/or recordings) and transcribed; how many questions were asked or items were elicited; when and where the study took place; and how the results were analysed, including whether any statistical analysis was involved. Your report should include a copy of any research instruments you used, such as interview questions, questionnaires, dialect recognition experiments and completed biographical data sheets.
- Presentation of the data. This is the place to describe the variant(s) or the attitudes you are investigating. You should define the range of variation for the dependent variable(s) you are investigating, plus any other vari-

ables that may affect the dependent variable, for example social variables (age, gender, ethnicity), stylistic variables (a casual conversation or the reading of a passage by the informants) or linguistic variables (the position of a variable in a clause, the height of vowel). You will also need to define and discuss all the social factors that are relevant to your project, and provide a table or list of all the relevant linguistic variables and their possible variants, with examples from your data or a summary of your questionnaire responses. Your report should include a copy of the transcript from which you have taken your examples, or a copy of the questionnaire. As mentioned earlier, quantitative studies must be statistically tested for significance.

- Discussion of your findings. Here you should analyse your data (see Section 1.5.5 above), discuss any patterns you have found and comment on how these correspond to your hypothesis. Discuss each independent variable individually, commenting on how it correlates with each dependent variable or each question of your questionnaire, and what it reveals.
- Your results. This section should address questions such as whether your results support your hypothesis, and if not, why not. Make sure you refer to everything you raised in the introduction. Were there any surprises? How do your findings compare with those of others researchers? How might your study be improved? What does your investigation suggest for future research?

1.5.8 Sample projects

Project 1: An analysis of a local accent.

- Choose a geographical area and conduct an analysis of the local accent using your own choice of linguistic variable(s) and two non-linguistic variables. You should have a sample of at least five informants for each combination of variables (eg. each age group × each class × linguistic variable).

The best methods of data collection here would be taped interviews or conversations. As suggested in the previous section, in your report you should outline the scope of your study, state why you chose this particular topic and justify your research methods. You should also provide biographical information about the informants and transcribe selections of your recordings into IPA, using a narrow or broad system of transcription depending on the focus of your study. Your analysis of the transcription would then identify occurrences of the linguistic variable(s) and trace any patterns of variant in relation to the non-linguistic variables or linguistic context. A comparison can also be made with other published studies on the locality, to see whether or not they confirm what has already been found or show something different in drawing your conclusions. Your transcripts will form an appendix to your report and should be referred to in it.

Project 2: Lexical change in (place) circa 1950 to the present day.

- Conduct a study of lexical differences between three generations of the same family, all of whom are still living in the area in which they were born. The sample should consist of at least three informants, one of whom can be yourself. Identify the extent of any lexical changes and the reasons for them.

The method of data collection could be taped interviews based on a written questionnaire or a spidergram. The collection of biographical information is essential, particularly with regard to education, since it could enable you to identify possible reasons for any lexical changes. For this project you could transcribe the selected sections of your recordings orthographically rather than into IPA. Compare your findings with those in published studies on the topic in the same locality, or with data from electronic resources. Do they confirm what was previously found? If not, how do they differ? In your report, outline the scope of your study, explain why you chose this particular one and describe and justify your research methods. Your transcripts should be presented as an appendix to the report, which should refer to it.

Project 3: Grammatical variations in a locality.
The data for this project could be collected by means of a questionnaire or gathered from contemporary writings in the local dialect, for example newspaper articles, poems and short stories. Write down instances of grammatical variation in orthographic notation. Having analysed your data, compare your findings with those from previous research on grammatical variations in the locality in question.

Project 4: Your peer group's attitude towards variations in language use.
Your data for this project should come from a questionnaire survey, possibly followed up by interviews and/or dialect recognition experiments. The success of your project will depend very much upon the design of the questionnaire and the kinds of question you ask in the dialect recognition experiment. The questionnaire should be general enough to elicit a large range of views but also sufficiently focused to obtain the reasons why the informants hold the views that they do. In this regard, biographical questions are essential. The questions you ask as part of your dialect recognition experiment should also allow for elaborated answers rather than merely 'Yes' or 'No'.

1.6 Further reading

Leith (1997) and Beal (2006) are good places to start for sociohistorical accounts of English. Views on standardisation, grammaticality and correctness can be found in Clark (2001), Crowley (1991, 1996), Honey (1989) and Milroy and Milroy (1993). Labov (1978) and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) cover social and geographical variations in English in the United States, and Milroy (1987) covers those in the United Kingdom. Wells (1999), Hughes *et al*. (2005) and Widdowson and Upton (2006) provide accounts of geographical variations in English in the United Kingdom, while Schneider, Burridge *et al*. (2004) do so for countries across the world. Trudgill (2002) and Kerswill and Williams (2002) discuss aspects of sociolinguistic variation and change. Montgomery (1995) and Wardhaugh (2006) are good introductory books on sociolinguistics in general. Woods *et al*. (1986) provide an overview of linguistic statistical analysis.

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