

Language, Society and Power
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CH. 1 +
part CH 2

CHAPTER 1

Language?

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Even though we use language constantly, we usually take it for granted. When we pay attention to it, it's usually because something has gone wrong or because we're passionate about the topic or speaker. While we will consider cases where things go wrong, in this book, we focus more often on how language works successfully, in common situations, in different ways, for different people. We also consider the effects that language can have, especially in relation to power, representations and control. Before we do this, we need to think about what 'language' is. This is not an easy task. What counts as a language is a political, cultural and technical question. As will be discussed in this and the following chapters, there are well-established languages that are often not considered to be 'proper' languages by people in general. To make matters even more complicated, individuals don't always use language in the same way. The language we use when we talk to our friends is not the same as the language we use to write a letter of complaint. Language varies depending on the people using it, the task at hand and the society in which it all takes place.

Linguists study language for many different reasons, with various questions that they want to answer. Whatever path this research takes, it always treats language as a system. Studying systems might sound tedious, but

the construction of these complex and changing systems, working with examples of language from the everyday world. And this is not just any set of rules for construction – language is a system that enables people to tell jokes, write poetry, make an arrest, sell you washing powder, pay a compliment and wish you good night.

1.2 WHY STUDY LANGUAGE?

It's important to study language because *language matters*. For example, the choice of words to describe a person or event reveals the attitude of the person writing or speaking. One such example concerns US CIA contractor Edward Snowden, who, in 2013, released classified material relating to British and American surveillance programmes. How he was described in the subsequent media coverage is instructive. Those who saw his actions as bravely exposing secret and harmful state actions call him a 'whistleblower' or 'patriot'. Those who argue that he was obligated to protect the confidentiality of this material label him a 'traitor'. This example shows how one word can serve as a shorthand for a belief system and position on Snowden's actions. Paying attention to these choices is part of having a critical awareness of language. This is a skill that this book will help you develop.

Because the choice of words – and how things are said – is so important, it's worth looking at two more examples. The first is similar to the Snowden example in that it concerns what is and is not labelled as 'terrorism'. In September 2016, an explosive device went off in Chelsea, New York. Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio both commented on the event, but they did so in very different ways. Governor Cuomo described it as an act of 'terrorism', while Mayor de Blasio refused to use this word. The governor pointed out that he and de Blasio agreed about what had happened. He continued:

'I think it becomes a question of semantics, if anything', Cuomo said.
'Yes, it was an intentional act. It was a violent act. It was a criminal act. And it was an act that frightened, hurt and scared many, many people. And generically, you call that terrorism.'

(Figueroa, 2016)

This news report is perhaps unusual in that it recounts an explicit disagreement about how to label a set of events. As the quote from Governor Cuomo makes clear, both men agree about what happened, and both evaluate the act very negatively. At the level of who did what to whom (see Chapter 2), they agree. But to call something an act of 'terrorism' invokes a specific set of associations. This is where they do not agree. Terrorists are generally represented as being an other, a 'them' that is seeking to destroy 'us'. That is, once the word 'terrorist' or 'terrorism' is used, people are inclined to see events through a very particular lens: one that makes a distinction between

us and them. More generally, the language used to describe acts of terrorism is the language of war, where we must fight *them* with force. Such naming, however, is not just a matter of choosing between two words. A 'terrorist' act is viewed by the media and the public in a different way to other violent acts; it attracts different legal punishments, and it shapes our views of who 'we' are. Choosing (or not choosing) 'terrorist' in this context reflects the belief system of the speaker. The words we use to describe people and events have consequences. This is precisely why we should pay attention to language and the way people use it.

The next example also shows a set of beliefs but of a very different kind. In July 2017, the *Economist* posed an interesting question. What do we call people who are older but not yet retired? (*The Economist*, 2017). They ask 'WHAT do you call someone who is over 65 but not yet elderly? This stage of life, between work and decrepitude, lacks a name'. A series of possibilities are then given.

These are some of the words that the *Economist* lists as being possible candidates for this group of people.

Geriatrics
Sunsetters
Nightcappers
Nyppies (Not Yet Past It)
Owis (Older, Working Less, Still Earning)
Pretirees

Are you familiar with all of them? What do they mean to you? Are there others that you can think of?

We will see in Chapter 8 that the representation of age and life stages is complicated (e.g., the use of 'decrepitude' in the preceding quotation). Here, the *Economist* have identified a gap in our language. They suggest that change in society has outpaced the language that we use to represent people. Language is always changing. For example, they report that the term 'teenager' was coined around 1940. It is not the case that people in this age group did not exist before, but rather, it had not seemed necessary to identify them, specifically until then.

Thinking about how we talk about age and life stage and how we think about terrorism and traitors are all good examples of what Norman Fairclough calls developing a 'critical awareness of language'. He writes that a 'critical awareness of language . . . arises within the normal ways people reflect on their lives as part of their lives' (1999: 73). Such reflection is well worth encouraging; Fairclough argues that the ability to understand how language

functions, to think about it in different ways, is crucial to understanding society and other people. Critical awareness isn't important because it makes us more accomplished or more intelligent; there is much more at stake. Fairclough argues that to understand power, persuasion and how people live together, a conscious engagement with language is necessary. That is, critical thinking about language can assist in resisting oppression, protecting the powerless and building a good society. Ferdinand de Saussure, sometimes referred to as the founder of modern linguistics, puts it rather more starkly. He writes: '[I]n the lives of individuals and societies, speech is more important than anything else. That linguistics should continue to be the prerogative of a few specialists would be unthinkable – everyone is concerned with it in one way or another' (1966: 7). People often say that quibbling over word choice, such as in the Edward Snowden case, is 'just semantics'. But it is much more than this. It is about the meaning of the words used (**semantics**) but also the context in which the words are used.

Semantics is just one of the areas of linguistics that explores how we understand and construct meaning. But there are many others. Some linguists work to describe the construction of word order (**syntax**) or the sounds that make up words (**phonetics**, **phonology** and **morphology**). Looking closely at language can tell us about

- how our brains understand and process language (psycholinguistics)
- how we learn languages and so how best to teach them (applied linguistics)
- how social factors (age, gender, class, ethnicity, and so on) affect the way people use language (sociolinguistics)
- how it might be possible to have a realistic conversation with a computer (artificial intelligence)
- what is distinctive about literature and poetry (stylistics)
- how people in different cultures use language to do things (anthropology)
- the relationship between words and meaning and the 'real' world (philosophy)
- whether someone is guilty of a criminal offence (forensic linguistics)
- the structure of non-verbal languages (e.g. sign languages)

This is far from a full account of the various kinds of linguistics. The subfields here are much richer and further reaching than the bullet points suggest. The important thing is to realise that language can be examined in a variety of ways with diverse and specific concerns in mind. It's also important to point out that these areas aren't completely separate. We may want to know something about how brains process language if we're interested in finding good teaching methods, for example. The way linguists in these areas go about studying language may also overlap. For example, the kind of analysis that is done in stylistics will be similar in some ways to the work done by forensic linguistics because there is a similar attention to the detail of language and some of the same tools of analysis are used. In this book, we'll be exploring what language can tell us about people as individuals and as

members of groups and about how people interact with other people. This is called sociolinguistics. The subject of our attention here is the way that language is used in normal life, by all kinds of people, to accomplish all manner of goals.

1.3 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

As we noted earlier, language matters, and in this book, we'll be exploring the way different groups of people are represented by and use language. To be able to do this, we need to understand how linguists study language and what it means to say that language is a system.

1.3.1 Language: a system

If we look closely at language, we find that it is in fact a rule-governed system. This may make it sound like language is *controlled* by rules that prevent it from changing. However, this is not what we mean by system; we need to be clear about what kind of rules we're talking about. These 'rules' are more like inherent 'building codes' that enable speakers to use their language. The building codes in language tell users of the language how to combine different parts of that language. This includes inherent building codes about which sounds and words can be combined together. For example, we all know inherently, if English is our first language, that 'ngux' is not a word that is possible in English. The building codes of English sounds (**phonemes**) tell us that we can't have 'ng' at the start of a word. In the same way, if I tell you that I recently bought a 'mert', you would be able to form the question: 'What is a mert?'. Even though you don't know what a 'mert' is, from the way the sentence is constructed, you know 'mert' is a noun. You would already know how to make its plural ('merts'). This is because of the building codes in English about where certain kinds of words go in sentences (**syntax**) and how to form plurals (**morphology**). Theoretical linguists work at discovering these building codes for particular languages, including sign languages. Although sign language uses a different **modality**, that is, manual, facial and body movements, it is composed of the same components we've described for spoken language. Linguists' research on spoken and sign language can be used to say something about language in general, that is, linguists can come to conclusions about all languages, grouping them according to certain structural criteria, and even make arguments about how the language faculty itself works.

Linguists don't decide on building codes and then try to make everyone follow them. Rather, linguists examine language to discover what the building codes are that make it work, that is, the things that make communication possible. This means that linguistics is **descriptive** (we'll come back to this important concept). As language changes, new building codes are discovered and described by linguists. Even the variation that sociolinguists

examine is systematic, that is, it appears to be amenable to description in terms of building codes.

The set of all the building codes that need to be followed in order to produce well-formed utterances in a language is referred to as 'the grammar' of a language. It is important to note that the meaning of 'grammar' for linguists is different from what 'grammar' refers to outside of the field of linguistics. Non-linguists typically use the term to refer to prescriptive rules of how to use language (prescriptive rules are described in Section 1.4). The theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky made an important distinction between **competence** in and **performance** of a grammar. To have competence in a language means to have knowledge of the grammar. Performance refers to the way individual speakers actually use the grammar. It is possible, therefore, for a speaker to have grammatical competence of a language but lack **communicative competence** of that same language because they are unaware of rules of social relationships, taboos or other cultural conventions. Knowing how to greet someone or what constitutes appropriate 'small talk' are examples of this competence. Communicative competence has also been called 'sociolinguistic competence' or 'pragmatic competence'.

David Crystal provides a list of some of the things we can do with language (2005: 462–468):

- expressing emotion
- expressing rapport
- expressing sounds
- playing
- controlling reality
- recording facts
- expressing thought processes
- expressing identity
- meeting technological demands

As Crystal's list makes clear, we can accomplish a range of things when we use language.

In order to see the different ways language can be used, consider a single word: 'fine'. Try to come up with a number of exchanges between two people in which one person uses the word 'fine'. Can it be used to do different things? How can we tell what the word is doing in each context?

In Activity 1.2, you might have come up with examples like the following:

- a I'm fine (in response to the question 'How are you?')
- b 'What fine weather we are having today (an attempt to start a conversation).
- c I hope you feel fine soon (to someone who is sick).
- d He's a fine man (positively evaluating a person's character).
- e He looks fine (very positively evaluating a person's appearance).

This makes clear that the same word can be used to do very different things. It can be used to engage in small talk about the weather, express concern about someone's health, and provide an assessment of a person's character or appearance. Moreover, knowing that these are appropriate things to say is a part of communicative competence. In many cultures, for example, the question 'How are you?' is not a real question. The person asking doesn't really want to know how you are. Rather, asking the question is a routine part of greeting someone. And the appropriate response is something like 'I'm fine; how are you?'. Communicative competence can also be articulated in terms of rules. But these rules are not commands. Rather, the rules that describe communicative competence constitute a shorthand for setting out what people actually do and what they find acceptable.

It is also worth remembering that not only language has 'rules'. Other systems of communication have inherent 'rules' too. The light that tells us when it's safe to cross the road is generally green. Around the world, there are differences in the shape of the light. Sometimes a word is given, like 'WALK' and sometimes a picture shape that suggests a person moving. The red light (in whatever shape it happens to be) tells pedestrians to stop. This signal varies from place to place. Some countries have a flashing red light, for example, indicating that you shouldn't start crossing the road. While there are differences in the way different countries configure their traffic signals, there is one thing that is the same: the traffic lights can't tell you to 'skip' or to 'watch out for the tiger'. They tell us only about whether or not we can proceed (either on foot or in our car). Even a new combination would not of itself provide a new message. For example, if both red and green lights were illuminated at the same time, you would probably conclude that the light was faulty, not that a new message was being communicated. Such lights are very limited in what they can communicate. The structure of spoken and written language, however, makes it possible to invent new words, exploit existing structures and repurpose existing spoken and written **texts**. This is true in all manner of contexts, from interaction with friends and family to more public interactions in the realm of politics and media. This key component of human language is called recursivity. This is what makes human language different from other kinds of communication like traffic lights.

1.3.2 Language: a system with variation

We tend to talk about English as though it is the same everywhere. But even in one city, the English that people use varies widely. Of course, this is true of any language. When we talk about 'a' language, we are referring to something that is rather abstract and elusive. Variation in language is a challenge, as it prompts us to think about how we can classify different varieties in relation to each other. How we choose to classify these varieties can vary according to linguistic and political considerations. We might think that a language variety can be identified geographically, such that everyone in England speaks English, while everyone in the United States speaks American English. But if you listen to someone from Liverpool in England and then to someone from Brighton, it's clear that there are some important differences.

There are differences in the way that people pronounce words, which varies systematically and often on the basis of geography. Such differences are often referred to in terms of **accent**. There are other differences between speakers of English in relation to the words they use for particular things (vocabulary) and even the order in which words are placed (syntax); we can talk about this collection of features in terms of **dialect** or **variety**. We will use the neutral term 'variety' because very often non-linguists use the term 'dialect' in a pejorative way. To say, for example, that Australian English is not a variety in its own right but merely a 'dialect' of British English immediately places Australian English in a subordinate position to British English.

Most speakers perceive that different varieties of a language exist on a hierarchy that awards a lot of prestige to those varieties at the top of the hierarchy and very little prestige or even stigmatisation to those at the bottom. How decisions are taken about what is 'correct', 'standard' or even attractive and desirable for a language is very often related to power (there are many different kinds of power, a topic that we consider in later chapters). For example, research has shown that speakers of English in Western countries believe that British English is the most correct variety of English in the world (Evans, 2005). The most likely reason is that speakers perceive British English to be the 'original' English and other varieties as 'spin-offs' of the original. In addition, the longstanding historical position of the United Kingdom as a powerful country plays a role in this perception. By contrast, Indian English, in spite of it being a first language for some (Saitaja, 2009: 2), is not perceived as having the same status as Englishes spoken in the West (the issues of 'world Englishes' are taken up in Chapter 10). As we described earlier, linguists value all varieties equally regardless of their origins, so this perception of a hierarchy of Englishes is not a descriptive one.

1.3.3 The potential to create new meanings

It is certainly possible to use existing words in a new way. For example, the verb 'to ghost' has long been a term to describe ghost writing (when

the named author employs someone else to write their book). Now, however, it is being used to describe the disappearance of an individual from a person's life and especially their online social network. While it is often used to describe a way of ending a romantic relationship, it can also be used more generally to refer to the disappearance of a friend. Predegrast observes that

Being 'ghosted' is one of the toughest ways to be dumped.

She then explains what it means:

It's when someone you've been seeing suddenly ceases all contact with you. They defriend you on Facebook, stop following you on Twitter and avoid responding to calls, texts and emails. They just disappear; fade out of your life mysteriously.

(Prendergast, 2015)

As we will see more in Chapters 4 and 5, social media provides interesting examples of language use. Some of this is related to the activities people can undertake using social media. For example, before Twitter, 'tweeting' was something that birds did, and the idea that you can 'inbox' someone would not have made much sense before email and indeed other alternative forms of electronic communication. While 'inbox' as a verb is not yet in the online Oxford English Dictionary, the verb 'tweet' is.

It is also possible for the function of a word to change. For example, US scholars have noticed that the word 'because' has recently been used in a new way (Zimmer, Solomon and Carson, 2014). This word has been used in the English language for hundreds of years as a conjunction (usually followed by 'of') as shown in Example 1.1.a.

Example 1.1

- a The picnic was cancelled because of the rain.
- b The picnic was cancelled because rain.
- c Fido ate too many biscuits because delicious.

More recently, 'because' has been turning up in sentences as a sort of preposition, as in Examples 1.1.b. and c. New uses for old words and changes to the kind of word it is (noun, verb, and so on) are far from unusual. The use of a conjunction as a word to serve new functions, as in the 'because' example, is unusual. This new use is particularly interesting to linguists, and they are still studying this new usage in order to ascertain just what the additional linguistic role of 'because' might be.

It is also possible to add entirely new words to the language. Not only is this possible, it is essential as new objects, practices and ways of doing things develop. As these words enter the language, they conform to the building codes (see Section 1.3.1) about how to construct an acceptable word in whatever language we're using. For example, the September 2016

update of the Oxford English Dictionary included (among many other new words) 'clickbait'. They provide the following definition:

Internet content whose main purpose is to encourage users to follow a link to a web page, esp. where that web page is considered to be of low quality or value.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

It is marked as colloquial and citations (that is, key examples) of the term are documented back to 1999.

Very new uses or unconventional uses of language aren't often found in dictionaries. Many people believe that because something cannot be found in 'the dictionary', it's not a legitimate use of the language. However, the lack of a dictionary entry is not evidence for the new word's illegitimacy. It is important to understand that dictionaries are descriptive, but they are also conservative in that they tend to include new meanings of words only when they have demonstrated some longevity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* won't amend their content every time you and your friends come up with a new use for a word. The compilers of dictionaries, **lexicographers**, make a judgement about whether to include a word based on how widely it is used (in terms of both time and number of people). The fact that the role of dictionaries is to describe language and not to dictate use is often misunderstood.

1.4 THE 'RULES' OF LANGUAGE: PRESCRIPTION VERSUS DESCRIPTION

Linguists understand that language change, such as new word formation, is a fundamental part of language. However, linguists aren't the only people interested in language. Most people have opinions about language and language use. We refer broadly to all the types of opinions and underlying belief systems that people have about language as 'language regard' (Preston, 2010). Looking at comments people make online, on television and in general conversation, we notice that people have very strong ideas about language. There may be particular words or expressions that are commented on, perhaps because they cause offence or because they are considered to be 'grammatically wrong'. This idea that some things are 'grammatically wrong' is a significant belief for many speakers. For example, a magazine called *The Idler* hands out annual bad grammar awards. They identify examples of what they believe to be bad usage of English. They argue the purpose of the awards is not to ridicule people but instead to have a discussion about language, but their position is clear when they claim 'we reckon grammar is more like the law' (*The Idler*, n.d.). The very idea that there is a right or wrong way to use language is a prescriptivist position (see Section 1.4). *The Idler* have devoted considerable time to this endeavour by recruiting readers to contribute nominations and selecting high-profile judges. The 'winner' is sent a copy of a well-known prescriptive grammar book.

What do you think about these words in Example 1.2? Do you think they are useful additions to English? What do you suppose someone from *The Idler* might say about them?

Example 1.2

- a slaktivist (noun): 'A person who supports a political or social cause via the Internet (e.g., by signing an online petition) and whose actions are characterised as: requiring little time, effort, or commitment, or as providing more personal satisfaction than public impact' (Oxford English Dictionary).
- b glam-ma (noun): 'A glamorous grandmother, esp. one who is relatively young or fashion-conscious. Also used as a form of address' (Oxford English Dictionary).
- c Squee (verb): 'Of a person: to utter a high-pitched squealing sound expressive of delight or excitement' (Oxford English Dictionary).

For linguists, and for lexicographers, meaning is determined by use. That is, we don't judge a use of a word as 'correct' or 'incorrect' because our concern is mutual understanding. This can be captured more precisely by talking about the difference between **description** and **prescription**. Linguists are concerned with describing what people do with language (description) while people who want to say that a certain use is incorrect are setting down rules for proper language use (prescription), quite apart from what people actually do. Prescriptivists have very strong ideas about how language should be used. They have clear ideas about what is 'correct' and what isn't. This is an example of language regard. Prescriptivists seem to think that if language changes, if 'rules' are broken, that the heart of language will be torn out. As we've pointed out, for linguists, these changes are an inherent feature of language and very interesting. As languages are used, they change naturally. Although language changes, it is always systematic; that is, language changes are always consistent with the building codes of that language. The difference between prescriptive and descriptive perspectives might take some getting used to, but it is fundamental for any study of language.

Many prescriptivist requests to respect the 'rules' also come with some kind of warning: breaking the rules will lead to breaking the language itself. 'The crisis is imminent', we are told; 'things have never been this bad, it's all the fault of young people, foreigners and poor schooling'. The themes of prescriptivist arguments remain strikingly consistent over time. Disapproval of the way some people use language, especially in relation to grammar and the meaning of words, has a very long history known as 'the complaint tradition' (Milroy and Milroy, 1999, see also Beal, 2009). The idea that language is in decline and that this is someone's fault dates back to at least the 14th century (Boletta, 1992; see also Crowley, 2003). You can find many contemporary examples of the complaint tradition in newspapers and on the internet.

The concept of correctness and 'standard English' is a tricky one (Trudgill, 1999). 'Standard English' (or 'standard' in any other language) is defined by speech communities and not linguists. Therefore, 'standard' refers to many varieties that speakers believe to be correct. In this book, we use the expression 'standard English' to refer to this popular definition. This term is intended to acknowledge that non-linguists believe that there are varieties that are more correct than others, a belief that is predicated on prescriptivist ideas but that we do not endorse.

In contrast, prescriptivists believe it's important to have guidelines or 'rules' for the best way of speaking. So they assert the importance of the 'rules' by recording them in books and teaching them to students. It's very important to consider who 'makes' these rules for language use and why they insist everyone follow them. These rules for language use (remember: we are *not* talking about the 'building codes') are dictated and maintained by educated members of the higher social echelons of society. They are the members of society who have the power to sanction members of the speech community for not 'following the rules'. These sanctions might take the form of a poor mark in school, a failed job interview, or lack of a promotion at work. So, knowing the prescriptive rules of language clearly has consequences. Because prescriptive ideas about language circulate in our culture, it is not uncommon to form judgements about other people because of their use of language. Writing in the *Baltimore Sun*, Lynne Agress asks, 'Why can't Americans speak/write English correctly?' (2016).

She provides a number of examples of 'errors' that are commonly made.

- confusion of singular and plural
- There's many people on the train versus There are many people on the train.
- The media is misinformed versus The media are misinformed.
- using 'good' as an adverb
- I'm good versus I'm well.
- using 'between' instead of 'among'
- I will divide the cake between my three friends versus I will divide the cake among my three friends.

While Agress is not particularly damning of people who make these mistakes, there is a clear negative judgement here. She writes: 'There are hundreds of grammar mistakes people make daily, and I cringe every time I hear just one. I am certain my readers have their own lists of pet peeves' (2016).

One longstanding complaint in the domain of written language relates to the use of apostrophes. One man is so upset by this, that he corrects them. He has developed a tool called 'the apostrophiser', which allows him to cover up 'incorrect' apostrophes on signs in his local Bristol (UK). While many of us do have our own 'pet peeves' about how language is used (linguists included), the idea that there is a single 'correct' way to use language is mistaken. The internet has also enabled a thriving community of individuals expressing their concern about 'falling' standards in language. Advice

about how to use language 'properly' can be easily found on social media. As Vriesendorp observes, 'the standard language ideology seems to have established itself firmly on these new platforms, adapting itself in the process' (2016: 18).

Consider the following example sentences. Decide which ones would be considered 'correct' from a descriptive or prescriptive position. What features of the examples make you think so?

Table 1.1 Prescriptive/descriptive activity

	Prescriptive	Descriptive
Example: <i>Mary don't usually be at church.</i>	Not correct: it does not follow prescriptive rules for negation in English.	Correct: it consists of a structure allowed by the building codes of English.
1. If I was you, I'd study harder for exams.		
2. Yesterday, I was conversating with my friend.		
3. Dog the up quickly ran road.		
4. The ring was very unique.		
5. It was an argument between my friend and I.		
6. He took less days off than his colleagues.		
7. I book read yesterday the have.		
8. Steve and me went to the cinema yesterday.		

Examples 3 and 7 are 'not correct' from either a prescriptivist or descriptivist perspective because they don't conform to the building codes of English and therefore don't communicate a clear message. A reader can probably rearrange the words to find an acceptable message, but all speakers of English would agree that something here isn't right. The other examples, however, seem to communicate a clear message and are 'correct' from the descriptive perspective. From the prescriptive perspective, though, they are 'incorrect' because they don't follow prescriptive rules.

All of these examples contain elements that prescriptivists might find very objectionable. The use of 'conversating' (in 2) and 'less' (in relation to a countable noun) annoy some people. Using 'unique' as a comparative rather than absolute description is also troubling to some people. You may feel like the example *Mary don't usually be at church* doesn't conform to the building

codes of English. In fact, there are varieties of English where this form is used. There are so many different kinds of English that some constructions might actually sound impossible to you. We'll encounter this again in Chapter 10.

1.5 POWER

Finding a full definition of power with respect to language is not straightforward. The many functions of language mean that there are different ways in which power can be exercised. While there are some examples of power being used to change language directly, the relationship is generally more subtle. We saw earlier that speaking a particular variety of English (e.g., British English) may make it possible to perform particular actions or influence particular groups of people. But even small variation in language use can bring benefits to speakers. People who speak the standard variety of British English, for example, will be thought to be more educated and more capable than others. This may give them access to better employment, institutions with power or even a better education. This is because of the attitudes that people have about language. While the speakers gain from being able to speak the standard language and so have a degree of power, it is not the case that they – as individuals – are controlling others. Rather, having competence in a prestigious language is in itself beneficial.

We noted earlier that language change is an inherent part of language, yet some people feel that language should stay the same. Some nations even have institutions which attempt to regulate the form of their language by stipulating which forms are 'correct' (the Académie Française in France, for example). There are many ways that nations seek to control what people do with language. Many countries regulate what people can say and write, or at least punishments exist for certain kinds of linguistic activity. The most common areas of 'regulation' relate to threats, encouraging others to commit crimes, protection of intellectual property and damaging someone's reputation. This kind of regulation can be understood in relation to the connection between language and actions. That is, sometimes saying something is doing something, and the restriction is not so much about the fact that language is used but that it is used to do something that should be prohibited. It is generally accepted that some speech acts should be prohibited: encouraging a person to murder someone else or shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded fire-free theatre are common prohibitions. Recently, a woman was sent to prison for involuntary manslaughter for encouraging her boyfriend to kill himself by sending him text messages (Bever and Phillips, 2017). The text messages did not directly instruct her boyfriend to kill himself, but they were understood by the court as encouraging him to do so.

Laws regulate language use in other ways. At a general level, many countries have designated one or more official languages. Wales, for example, has both Welsh and English as official languages (though this has not always been the case). Once a language is 'official', this has many potential

consequences for education, interaction with government bodies and public signage. And while being an official language is good for the languages that are so identified, it can result in the stigmatisation of other languages. Nevertheless, the choice of an official language is usually connected to who holds power (the elite) and their attitudes about languages.

Do you think some kinds of language use should be regulated by law? Which ones? Why?

As already mentioned, some language use is prohibited by law and is generally accepted as being appropriate for the protection of individuals and public safety. But other examples of attempted language regulation are less straightforward, even though they may seem to be connected with the public good.

In March 2016, Salford City Council in the UK banned swearing in a part of the city known as Salford Quays (Boult, 2016). Some people were unhappy about the ban, but Salford defended it, pointing out that they held a public consultation. The presentation of the consultation results included the following:

118 (94%) of respondents agree with no causing general disturbance including being abusive to other persons, using foul language, being rowdy and inconsiderate.

(Salford City Council, n.d.)

It is surprising that 6% of people did *not* think that being abusive and inconsiderate is bad. Perhaps this was because these 6% did not believe it is a particular problem in this area. But if the wording of the quotation above represents the actual question that people were asked, this presents a problem for the respondent. That is, perhaps people were asked, 'Do you think that we should ban people causing general disturbance, including being abusive to other persons, using foul language, being rowdy and inconsiderate?' If a person did agree that abusive behaviour causes 'general disturbance' but swearing does not, how should they respond? Thus the list would force a respondent to answer a question which actually includes a number of issues, which they may have different views on. Further, it is not certain a respondent would consider 'foul language' to be synonymous with 'swearing'. Here, the writers of the consultation may have used the power of the list (combined with the power of the questionnaire) in order to gather evidence to

The many ways in which language is used and the contexts in which it occurs means that there are different ways in which power can be exercised. Indeed, sometimes language is regulated in other, less predictable ways. In 2014, China banned wordplay in the media and advertisements (Branigan, 2014; Walker, 2014). The country's governmental print and media watchdog argues that this is to prevent 'cultural and linguistic chaos' (Branigan, 2014).

[T]he order from the State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television says: 'Radio and television authorities at all levels must tighten up their regulations and crack down on the irregular and inaccurate use of the Chinese language, especially the misuse of idioms.' (Branigan, 2014)

China is certainly not alone in banning these kinds of language use. In 2016, North Korea was reported as banning sarcasm in relation to their leader (Agerholm, 2016). While this can be interpreted as a restriction on freedom of speech, others (e.g., Balantrapu, 2016) argue that it actually protects people. Nevertheless, the reference to 'inaccurate use' of Chinese in the preceding example clearly indicates a concern with prescriptivism.

Influence over language, and influence over people through language, is far more commonly achieved in less obvious and direct ways than passing a law. Of course there are situations where physical or institutional power has a direct influence on how language is understood. When a police officer asks you to stop your car, for example, the institutional power (and perhaps even their weapon) lends a particular force to the spoken request (Shon, 2005). In fact, such a request would more likely be understood as a command, because of the context in which the speech takes place.

Consider the following utterance:

'Nice dress.'

Does this look like an exercise of power?

Now consider the same utterance used in these contexts:

- a female friend to a female friend
- a male friend to a male friend
- a male boss to a much younger female employee
- a male stranger to a young woman walking alone

The same utterance can change its meaning and effect depending on who is saying it and in what context. In the male boss example, the way in which the phrase 'nice dress' is said will also be relevant (as will any previous interactions they have had).

A person doesn't need to have an obvious position of power in order for this to be exploited linguistically. When a manager uses a particular form of language, the power comes partially from their position (as your boss) but perhaps also from the kind of language that is used. We can think about this not as physical power, or even institutional power, but as 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1991). Calling it symbolic power draws our attention to the link between power and symbols, that is, between power and language. To call it 'symbolic power' is not to say that the power is ineffective (we'll come back to Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power in Chapter 6). In many ways, it is more effective because it doesn't appear to be an exercise of power. It's also worth remembering that language can be used to do things. Sometimes saying something it is doing something (Austin, 1975). It is possible to insult, persuade, command, compliment, encourage or make a promise using language. While these can be seen as individual acts, when repeated over time, the culmination of such linguistic acts might change the way a person sees an issue.

Thus, while language is important in the exercise of power at particular moments, we also need to understand that language can work across long stretches of time. We can be commanded to do something now, but we can also be influenced to think and behave in a certain way pretty much all the time. This certainly involves language, but we need something more in order to understand how power can work across long stretches of time. Fairclough puts it as follows:

It is important to emphasise that I am not suggesting that power is just a matter of language. . . . Power exists in various modalities, including the concrete and unmistakable modality of physical force . . . It is perhaps helpful to make a broad distinction between the exercise of power through coercion of various sorts including physical violence, and the exercise of power through the manufacture of consent to or at least acquiescence towards it. Power relations depend on both, though in varying proportions. Ideology is the prime means of manufacturing consent. (2001: 3)

Fairclough explains the difference between power working to make you do something (coercion) and power working to make you think you want to do something (consent). While a person can be ordered to speak in a particular language (coercion), they can also be conditioned to accept that the particular language is the correct way of speaking (consent). Once they believe that the language is the correct one, they will use of their own volition. This belief can be connected to the concept of ideology. The concept of **ideology** is a difficult one to come to terms with and we'll keep coming back to it in this book.

1.5.1 Ideology

Examining language closely allows us to pick out these ideologies. In the same way that we can deduce the structure of a language by studying

the way people use it, we can also describe the structure and content of an ideology. Power, and especially symbolic power, is supported by ideologies. Because scholars have many approaches to defining ideology, we don't cover them all here. Rather, we'll describe a few key ideas that will provide you with the tools you need to help you understand language and power.

The linguists Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge define ideology 'as a systematic body of ideas, organised from a particular point of view' (1993: 6). In everyday contexts, the word 'ideology' is something negative or at the very least **marked**. We think that only groups like terrorists have an ideology. But as an ideology is a set of beliefs, a world view, we all have ideologies. While they might seem natural, normal and commonsensical, they are ideologies nevertheless. It is common to think that ideology is bad and that only other people have ideologies. But this is not the case. In a similar way, we don't tend to notice our own language as one with an 'accent' when we are among people who speak like us. We mostly only notice other accents. Our perception of our own ideologies is the same. Our ideologies seem normal, and we tend to label the world views of people who see the world differently as 'ideological'. It is this common sense, this seemingly natural and normal way of thinking and acting which we can talk about in terms of the dominant ideology, or **hegemonic** ideology. So, ideology is a way of talking about a whole set of ways of thinking and acting.

As world views, ideologies help us to make sense of the world and the people in it. Earlier, we referred to prescriptivism. This is the belief that there are correct ways of using language. As we discussed, these correct ways are defended as protecting a language, promoting clarity and mutual comprehension. As you can see now, prescriptivism is an ideology, sometimes referred to as **standard language** ideology. But as we have also seen, ideologies have consequences. The standard language ideology results in negative judgements being made about people who do not use the 'correct' forms of language.

Ideologies also have structures. The beliefs that constitute the ideology can be identified (for example, that there is a standard language and that people should always use it). Moreover, these beliefs, and so the structure of the ideology, can be mapped and understood by paying attention to the way the choices are made in language. Consider the two sentences from Agress quoted earlier:

There are hundreds of grammar mistakes people make daily, and I cringe every time I hear just one. I am certain my readers have their own lists of pet peeves.

(2016)

The identification of 'mistakes' and the account of her 'cringing' clearly shows the negative regard she has for those who don't follow this standard language ideology. Moreover, she includes her readers in this ideology as she is 'certain' that they have their 'own lists of pet peeves'.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out that, in addition to individuals having their own ideologies, ideology also exists on the group level:

[I]deologies serve particular interests which they tend to present as universal interests, shared by the group as a whole.

(1991: 167)

Given that all groups have a particular point of view, everyone has ideologies. However, we tend to only talk about 'ideology' when we want to draw attention to the power or the particular interests ideologies have. To label another group's values as 'ideology' is common; to talk about one's own values in the same way is not common at all. A group's ideology will be unmarked for that group. However, thinking about our own 'taken for granted' values, as members of groups or as individuals, is an important task for critical thinking.

The way language is used is not the only evidence of ideology, but it is an important one. Language use creates and represents ideological concerns, as we saw in the examples about terrorism and traitors at the start of this chapter. The more general idea is that because language is connected to ideology in this way, we can be encouraged to do things, not because someone has commanded us at a particular point in time but because we have internalised certain values that mean we want to do certain things. This internalising of values takes place over longer stretches of time. Language is crucial to the creation and maintenance of 'common sense' ideology. You can think about ideology as a way of structuring the way language is used to communicate a more general message involving values and beliefs, in short, a world view. In summary, some key things to remember about ideology are that they are held by individuals and groups and they are often not recognised by the individual or group as a powerful influence on their own behaviour.

1.6 'POLITICAL CORRECTNESS'

As we've already seen, people tend to have strong views about their own language and may fervently resist any changes made to it, especially if it means that they have to change their own linguistic behaviour. In relation to language, this is sometimes called 'political correctness'.

'Political correctness' is a contested term and a contested practice. What it refers to, who uses and it and why people label practices in this way are far more complex than may first seem apparent. Generally, however, it is a reaction *against* people arguing for equal and non-discriminatory treatment. As Talbot writes: 'Anti-PC discourse is a response to the direct interventions into sexist and other discriminatory practices' (2010: 240). For some, it seems reasonable to think that language can be used in a way that doesn't discriminate or demean. Linguists often refer to this practice as 'language reform' because it has at its heart a concern with what we could call

representational justice. Suppose there were a group that is discriminated against (let's call them 'Martians') and suppose that the term 'Martian' is pejorative. If a new term to refer to them were suggested, for example 'Marsites', would Martians cease to be a marginalised group? Would people think about Martians differently if they were known as 'Marsites'?

O'Neil (2011) argues that language reform in pursuit of political correctness will be unending. He argues that if we focus on the *form* of language rather than the *intent*, then the negative attitudes we seek to eliminate will simply attach to the new 'correct' word. We then need to invent yet another new term and the process starts again.

What do you think of this argument? Do you think language reform is futile?

One of the reasons people resist what they see as 'politically correct' language reform is connected to the reluctance to view language as political. Specifically, Cameron notes that people seem to object to their language choices being seen as political choices; 'Choice has altered the value of the terms and removed the option of political neutrality' (1995: 119). Burridge (1996) argues that there are three main reasons that people do not like language reform. The first is that people don't like linguistic change (see discussion above). The second is people resent being told what to do with their language because it seems like censorship. That is, critics argue that political correctness is an imposition of authority, a command to speak (and perhaps think) in a particular way. In this sense, they argue, it breaches rights to freedom of thought and speech. The third objection stems from the fact that people are uncomfortable when told that a term they thought was neutral or inoffensive is actually laden with meanings they did not intend. When someone is told their language use is offensive, it feels very much like their character is under attack (they are a bigot, racist, misogynist and so on). Resistance to 'political correctness' is carried out by asserting such changes are trivial and pointless. Thus, language reform is a kind of language change that is resisted using the accusation that these changes are frivolous and about 'political correctness'. Thus, the term 'political correctness' and what we understand it to mean is a direct result of more or less conscious effort directed at discrediting certain kinds of language reform and those who advocate it.

Cameron notes that the circulating definitions of PC all come from people denouncing a particular 'politically correct' change or attacking the concept as a whole. This tends to be political too: '[T]he way right wing commentators have established certain presuppositions about "political correctness" over the past few years is a triumph – as a sociolinguist I cannot help admiring it – of the politics of definition, or linguistic intervention' (1995:

123). But the choices that are available in a language have significant consequences. Cameron points out that language reform 'changes the repertoire of social meanings and choices available to social actors' (Cameron, 2014 [1990]: 90). This means that language reform provides social actors and people with particular ways of representing themselves and being represented by others. Language reform can provide people with positive terms in which to construct their identity. This is particularly important where no such positive terms previously existed.

The following are some examples of 'politically correct' language; some are actually in common use, and some have been reported by the media but are not actually used at all. Which ones are 'real' examples? What social meanings are being created by the new terms?

- a chairperson
- b living impaired
- c ethnic minorities
- d thought showers
- e snow figure
- f differently abled
- g seniors
- h herstory

In recent years, political correctness has become closely associated with terms that regulate speech in public domains at educational institutions (especially universities). Some examples include 'no platforming'; 'trigger warnings' and 'safe spaces'. No platforming refers to the practice of not allowing people with particular views to speak at an event. Trigger warnings refers to statements made before a public discussion to alert the participants that the discussion topics may be upsetting or offensive. Safe spaces refers to spaces where a person will be free from discrimination of any kind. As these practices are seen by some as impediments to free speech or worse, a prevention of the truth being told, they are criticised and rejected.

The discussion of 'terrorism' can also be understood as an example of the idea that political correctness is a barrier to truth. President Barack Obama has also been criticised in relation to his rejection of the phrase 'Islamic terrorist', instead using simply 'terrorist'. Critics argue that to refuse to say 'Islamic terrorist' denies a link between Islam and terrorism. Obama argued that it is important to remember that while some terrorists are Muslim, they do not represent all of Islam and the phrase 'Islamic terrorist' suggests that they do (Diaz, 2016).

Considering our discussion of prescriptive and descriptive perspectives, you may be wondering how prescriptive rules are different from language

reform and how it is that linguists don't agree with prescriptive rules but they do agree with language reform. Anne Curzan, a linguist at the University of Michigan, explains in her 2014 book *Fixing English* that there are different types of prescriptivism based on the aims of the prescriptive rules:

- standardising prescriptivism, which aims to enforce 'standard' usage;
- stylistic prescriptivism, which aims to distinguish between points of style;
- restorative prescriptivism, which aims to restore earlier usages, thus preserving the language from decline and decay;
- politically responsive prescriptivism, which aims to promote inclusive, non-discriminatory or 'politically correct' usages [what we referred to as language reform above].

(Curzan, 2014: 24)

So, many of the so-called ungrammatical sentences in Activity 1.4 reflect a kind of standardising prescriptive rule. In contrast, the 'not referring to terrorists as "Islamic"' is a politically responsive one. Linguists, generally, do not object to 'politically responsive prescriptivism' / language reform because its aim is representational justice to promote non-discriminatory usage, and it can have a positive effect on society. Standardising, stylistic or restorative prescriptivism, in contrast, can have negative effects (e.g., hindering social mobility).

Linguists do acknowledge that not everyone shares their point of view about prescriptivism (of any type) and are realistic about the need to follow prescriptive rules in many contexts. Our goal is to understand what prescriptivism is and how it affects society even if we, ourselves, follow prescriptive rules.

1.7 SUMMARY

In this book, we consider how language, ideology and power all come together. Sometimes the power that language has is difficult to observe. The notion that there is a correct form of English, discussed above, is an ideology that has substantial repercussions (Lippi-Green, 2011), and those repercussions can be seen as the effects of the power of language. For example, scholars have shown that attitudes to accented language can prevent a person from getting hired for a job (e.g., Carlson and McHenry, 2006), interfere with their education (e.g., Labov, 1982), and prevent a person from finding housing (e.g., Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh, 1999). Employment, education and housing are three essential aspects of life.

Using language in a particular way sends a message about the things you think are important and communicates something about who you are. We draw conclusions about people because of the language they use. For example, the language used by people with high status will generally garner more respect than language associated with marginalised people. While this may seem to some to be entirely unproblematic, it is also ideological. Whether a language variety reflects something positive or negative depends very much on what or who that variety is associated with.

In this chapter, we've introduced some of the themes and issues that are taken up throughout this book. Understanding language as a system, with inherently understood structure, is important in exploring the kinds of variation that we find. The rules that we're interested in are those which explain what people actually do (descriptive), rather than those about what people should do (prescriptive). While some people are uncomfortable with language change, it is inescapable and unstoppable. It is also exciting, as such change is possible exactly because of the creative possibilities that language provides. This adaptability is an important language function, but there are others. Studying language also allows us to understand the way people exercise power with language and, in turn, ways this can be resisted. We introduced the relationship between language and power. The complexity of this relationship can be seen in the case of 'political correctness': it is a relationship we continue to explore in the following chapters, as it can take some time for this complex interaction to make sense. Studying language allows us to think critically about power and helps us see that what we might think of as 'common sense' is nevertheless ideological. In the next chapter, we consider the tools we need to analyse some of these questions in more depth.

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CHAPTER 2

Language, thought and representation

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter, we began to discuss the way that linguists understand the structure and functions of language and key concepts like ideology. In this chapter, we explore Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs, which will provide a way of discussing how meaning is constructed at the level of the word, how this can change, how words fit together into larger structures (sentences) and what happens when we make choices in sentences. Thinking about words as signs may take a while to get used to; likewise, the use of 'sign' in the technical sense introduced in this chapter can also take some time to feel familiar. These models of meaning are important though, as they help articulate the way small changes can have significant consequences for the meaning communicated.

2.2 LANGUAGE AS A SYSTEM OF REPRESENTATION

Language is one way of representing reality. It is possible to analyse how language does this. There are other ways to represent reality. A person might take a photograph, make a drawing or write some music. The elements of these representations can also be analysed. A black-and-white photograph might be understood differently to one that is in colour; this difference is meaningful. When thinking about visual representations, it is clear that there

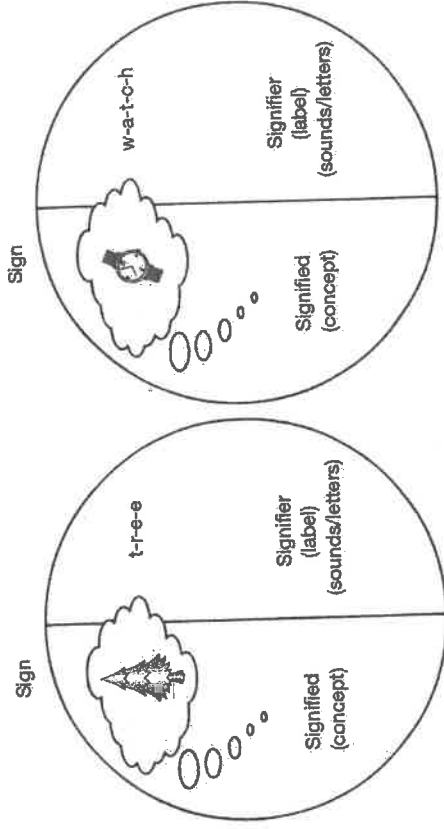


Figure 2.1 Saussure's model of the sign

standing in a particular place. They choose what to include in the visual frame, what to focus on and so on. When it comes to language, even though we have building codes to follow, there is always more than one way of representing a person, event or situation. In this chapter, we provide some tools that will help identify the choices that language users can make and also their significance. We begin with the concept of the sign.

In the definition that we're working with, all 'signs' have two parts: a concept and an object or marker that is connected to the concept. For example, the pedestrian signals at a crosswalk that tell you when to walk or not are signs because of the connection between the red light (the object) and the concept of stopping. Without these two parts, the red light would just be a red light. When we know that red means 'stop', the red light becomes a sign.

Words in language are also signs. For Saussure, a **sign** is made up of two things: a **signifier** and **signified**. His definition of the sign makes a distinction between the sound we hear (the **signifier**) and the concept this makes us think of (the **signified**). So, for example, when you hear the sounds represented by the letters d-o-g, you think of the concept 'canine mammal'. Together, the word sound and the concept it invokes form a sign. It is important to note 'A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern' (Saussure, 1966: 66). These cannot be separated in the sign; to try to do so would be like trying to cut only one side of a piece of paper (Saussure, 1966: 113). A signifier needs at least one signified for there to be a sign. If there is no such signified, the alleged signifier is merely a sound that *could* be a word; it is not a sign by Saussure's definition.

The connection between words and their meaning is accidental: there is no reason why bread should be called 'bread'. This can be seen clearly if one considers other languages. In French, bread is 'pain', and in Welsh, it is 'bara'. The arbitrary connection between words and their meaning was one of Ferdinand de Saussure's great insights. Nevertheless, saying that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary doesn't suggest that words



[signifier] is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification [signified], with which it has no natural connection in relation' (Saussure, 1966: 69). You might be thinking that signifiers do have a natural connection with their signifieds, for example, in the case of onomatopoeic words, those we use for sounds, like what animals make. However, while a bee in English will buzz, in Japanese, its sound is represented by 'boon boon'. This shows that there is no straightforward connection between concepts and sounds. Even the sounds of the natural world that we might assume are heard in the same way by everybody are represented differently by different languages. At best, such examples of animal noises and the like are marginal cases of how language reflects meaning and depend on conventional associations (especially when written) or the speaker's ability to imitate the noise made by the animal.

There is more to Saussure's work than his contributions on signs. He is also usually credited with being the founder of **structuralism**, which had great influence on linguistics, literary criticism and the social sciences. We'll look at structuralism when we consider signs later in the chapter. But recall that in Chapter 1 we established that language is a system; systems have rules, and these rules structure the language. The system of language allows us to talk about and represent the world around us. But just as the relationship between word and meaning is arbitrary, so too is the way that language divides up the world.

2.2.1 Different kinds of language

Saussure distinguishes three kinds of language. Recall in Chapter 1 we discussed the difficulties of knowing exactly what we mean when we talk about 'language'. The three aspects Saussure identifies help with some of these difficulties. The first of these is '*langage*', which has been translated as 'human speech', including its psychological and physical aspects, belonging both to the individual and to societies. It is the most general category and is composed of the following two aspects, which will be our focus here. These two parts of 'language' are '**langue**' and '**parole**'. You can think of language as competence and parole as performance (both in Chomsky's terms that we discussed in Chapter 1). The former is the overarching language system, the latter being individual use of language. While they are treated as separate by Saussure, they are also closely linked.

Langue is the system that makes parole possible. In so far as langue makes speech possible, it has a social element. As we'll see when we look more at definitions of signs, the social and conventional agreement on how signs are constructed is crucial. You can think of langue as the rules of the game, the entire system, including the building codes discussed in Chapter 1 together with communicative competence. Saussure provides a musical metaphor. He compares langue to a symphony written for an orchestra and parole to the performance of the symphony. The quality or nature of the composition is not related to how a particular orchestra may perform it (1966: 18).

While individuals draw on langue every time they use language, they don't have direct access to langue. Langue is 'not complete in any speaker;

it exists perfectly only within a collectivity' (Saussure, 1966: 12). We can only talk about langue sensibly if we have a community of speakers. You can't have a language all by yourself. This is why there is a social aspect to langue.

Every instance of language in the world, all actual utterances, is parole. As speakers, we perform parole acts. While as speakers of a language we rely on shared understanding (accounted for by langue), as individuals, we can do things with language that haven't been done before. You can construct a sentence that is so odd that you can be pretty confident that no one else has ever said or written it. For example, 'The surly clouds gathered their amusing faces and spat furiously on my new chatreuse-coloured coat.' While this is a slightly poetic example (representing clouds as people, with faces and moods), because of langue, the system we all share, you should be able to understand this original parole act.

It is the relationship between langue and parole that is important. The system and rules of langue can change. These changes are very slow and may take hundreds of years. Individuals start using a new word, or an existing word in a new way (all these usages are parole), and other language users understand and adopt this. When this new linguistic behaviour is well established, we can say that the new form has become part of langue, one that we all understand. The last part is important; the new behaviour has to become recognised and conventional, such that other people understand it. That is, acts of parole draw on and contribute to the abstract system of langue. As Saussure puts it, 'Language has an individual aspect and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other' (1966: 8). The distinction between langue and parole, however, allows us to think through their differences, while understanding that they are linked. It allows us to understand how language use can be individual and original and yet still be communicative.

While this is only a model, it is a useful one, as it helps us understand how language enables us to communicate and how language changes. It is the level of parole that we are normally most concerned with in this book, at least as a starting point. There are a number of reasons for this. The first, and most important, is that we don't have direct access to langue. While it would be very convenient if it were the case, langue is not a big book somewhere with all the codes written down. These codes are the same 'building codes' we referred to in Chapter 1. The only access that we have to the codes of langue is through the particular uses of language, that is, parole. From this evidence, we can try to map what the code is.

The second reason we focus on parole is that as sociolinguists, we're primarily interested in how people use language. The creative aspect of language means that speakers will always do things that are different, new and surprising. The concept of langue and its relationship with parole allows us to describe and account for this.

Because instances of parole both draw on and contribute to langue, as individual speakers, we have some power over what langue contains. Were we all to decide to call 'bread' 'dice', for example, eventually that would become part of langue. Yet, while many speakers might not make conscious decisions to change linguistic signs, change nevertheless occurs (see Section 1.3.3).

2.2.2 Signs and structure

We have described how a sign needs both a signifier and a signified to be a sign. In this model of meaning, Saussure postulates that a sign needs other signs in order to have meaning. He suggests 'Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position' (Saussure, 1966: 118). That is, the meaning of a linguistic sign depends on its relation to other signs. It may be useful to think of this relation using a spatial metaphor, where the meaning of each sign is contained in a space. The space that signs occupy fits together, such that if a space is occupied by one sign, it means that same space can't be occupied by another. In the example of traffic signs earlier, we could say that 'red' means 'stop' because 'green' means 'go' and amber/yellow means something else. In this context, the meaning of 'red' depends on what it does not mean ('go').

Consider, for example some linguistic signs that are related, that are in the same semantic field:

COLLEAGUE, ASSOCIATE, FRIEND, ACQUAINTANCE, MATE, COMPANION

All of these linguistic signs say something about a relationship. While these might all be considered synonyms to some degree, which word a person would use to refer to another person depends on the kind of relationship they have. Further, referring to someone as an 'acquaintance' will be interpreted in light of the fact that the word 'friend' was not used. Likewise, we can say that 'mate' means what it does because it does *not* mean 'friend', 'associate', 'colleague' or 'companion'. We can say that the space a sign occupies that is, what it means, is delineated by the spaces all other signs leave behind: 'In language... whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitute it' (Saussure, 1966: 121).

Understanding that this is how words have meanings is important, as it demonstrates the importance of which choices are made. Because 'friend' and 'acquaintance' occupy different spaces and mean different things, it matters if we describe someone as one or the other. It changes the representation we are making of the world and the people in it.

The way we've been talking about langue may seem all encompassing and monolithic as if we're talking about the langue of the whole English language. If we included the whole English language, we'd be considering all the different varieties of English: British, American, Australian, Indian, Singaporean and so on. Depending on the kinds of questions we're asking, this may make sense. But in thinking about how to use language in a particular context, it only really makes sense to include specific varieties. For example, in Indian English, 'wallah' refers to a tradesperson or worker, usually of a particular kind that is specified in the first part of a compound noun phrase. Thus, 'taxiwallah' is a taxi driver. While in the abstract langue that encompasses all English 'wallah' would jostle for semantic space with 'tradesperson' and other similar terms, in other parts of the English-speaking world, it may not be relevant as a sign at all. It would simply be a sound, as there would be no conventional linking of this signifier ('wallah') to a signified. Thus when considering the relationship between various signs, we need to know which signs and relationships are relevant in the communicative context we're looking at

We can talk about these changes over time with the following terms: **synchronic** and **diachronic**. The first, synchronic, refers to a particular point in time. That is, we can consider the state of a language at a particular point and describe it and the variation found in it. The second, diachronic, refers to considering a language over an extended period of time. A diachronic perspective means that we consider how language has changed from one point in time to another. In English, for example, around the 14th century, 'girl' was used to refer to a child of either sex (Oxford English Dictionary), but now it only refers to a female child. In Irish English, however, 'girl' still refers to a child of either sex.

We need to appreciate both diachronic and synchronic aspects to understand language, as language 'always implies both an established system and an evolution; at every moment it is an existing institution and a product of the past' (Saussure, 1966: 8). We'll see in later chapters that changes over time (diachronic) and comparing variation in language at a particular time (synchronic) are crucial if we're to understand how people are using language and what the significance of any use may be.

Find an etymological dictionary (like the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and trace the history of the meanings of 'troll', 'thug' or 'hysteria'!

2.3 LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

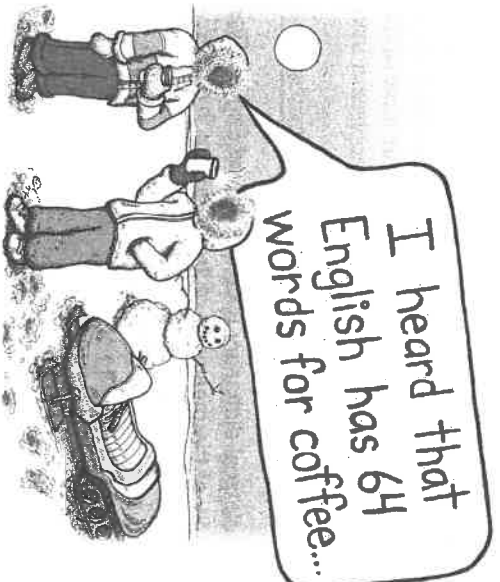
Linguistic diversity recognises that languages differ in their building codes (Chapter 1) and the lexemes they contain. Thinking about the differences between lexemes is a good place to start. Linguistic diversity is very easy to see at the level of the word (or sign). These differences are a source of interest to linguists and the general public alike. For example, recently in the UK and in the US (Gonzalez, 2017), there has been a great deal of discussion about the Danish verb 'hygge' and the related adjective 'hyggeligt'. The claim is that this word is both untranslatable to English and a key part of Danish culture. Levinson (2013) glosses hygge as 'pleasant togetherness' and provides a detailed semantic explication of the word. It is hardly surprising that different languages have different ways of describing the world. The level of popular and commercial interest in the concept (Higgins, 2016) is interesting, but the important questions for linguists are how significant are these differences and what do they mean? An example that may be more familiar is the myth that 'Eskimos' have hundreds of words for snow. This myth is based on a misrepresentation of the linguistic evidence and a misunderstanding of the concept of linguistic diversity (Pullum, 1991). Because the proliferation of lexemes in a particular semantic field continues to attract much interest among the general public, it is all the more important that we understand what linguistic diversity is.

It was recently reported that the Scots language has 421 words for snow (Scottsman, 2015).

You can compare English words for snow and Scots words for snow by consulting an online historical thesaurus.

<http://historicalthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/>

Do all the terms refer only to snow? Are they all in current use?



*Translated from Inuktitut.

Image 2.1 'Eskimo'

2.3.1 Semantics

Linguistic diversity is very often discussed in terms of lexical items (like words for snow). Indeed, this is a very useful way of understanding the differences between languages and how languages can develop. Here we consider the semantic field of 'friendship' in order to see some of this diversity in more detail and to understand what it means more broadly.

We begin with new words developing in Swedish to describe the kinds of relationships that people have (Baer, 2016).

- a sambo: someone with whom you are in a long-term romantic relationship and live with
- b sätbo: a long-term partner with whom you don't live
- c kombo: a friend you live with
- d mambo: parents you live with

In some varieties of English, the choices available for (a) would be 'giftfriend', 'snufffriend' or 'harthard'. But none of these individuals is standard English.

Having different terms for friendship and other relationships is not unusual in Russian, as Wierzbicka (1997: 57–71) outlines, there are a number of terms for 'friend':

- Drug: a very close friend
- Podrug: a close friend, but less close than 'drug'
- Prijatelj (Fem, prijatelj'nica): a more distant friend, perhaps the closest to the English 'friend'
- Znakomyj (Fem. znakovaja): an even more distant friend but closer than 'acquaintance'

Wierzbicka provides detailed explications of these concepts. But for our purposes, what is important to note is that the Russian terms and the Swedish terms do not match exactly the English terms for these concepts.

2.3.2 Syntax

Just as languages encode semantic differences in various ways, grammatical systems also vary. In English, word order is important for meaning. 'Alex greeted Chris' means something different to 'Chris greeted Alex'. English has what is called an SVO order (Subject, Verb, Object). But not all languages follow this order and not all languages rely on word order for meaning.

In 1982, Romero-Figueroa gathered linguistic data from the Warao language (spoken in parts of Venezuela). He argues that in Warao, it is usual to have the following word order: O(object) S(subject) V(verb). The default word order is OSV. He provides the following example.

Example 2.1

- a erike hube abun-ae
Enrique snake bite PAST
'A snake bit Henry (Enrique)'
- b ma haroko atamo ine nao -ya
my house OBL. I come PRES.
'I come from my home!'
(Romero-Figueroa, 1985: 120)

We can see in the second line of in Example 2.1 that the verb comes last and that the object ('Henry' and 'my home') come before the subject ('A snake' and 'I'). An example of a language that does not always rely on word order is Greek. While SVO structure is common, it is not required.²

Example 2.2

- a I papia pige sti limni
The duck went.3sg to-the pond
'The duck went to the pond.'
- b sti limni pige i papia
'The duck went to the pond.'

Greek can have these different word orders for two reasons. First, verb forms in Greek contain information about the subject of the verb. So, when a Greek speaker hears/sees 'pige, they know there is a third person singular subject. Including this information in verbs means it is not always necessary to specify a subject because this information is encoded in the verb. Secondly, the nouns (the subject and object) also contain information to indicate which noun is the subject and which is the object.

How does a Greek speaker know which word order to use? The choice of what to put first depends on what is already known in the conversation. If people in a conversation had been talking about the duck and wanted to say something new about it, they would use example (a). The noun 'duck' comes first because it is **given information** – it is already known about as a topic of discussion. The pond, however, and the fact that the duck went there is **new information**. If the pond was the current topic of conversation, then speakers might choose example (b), as the pond is given information while the duck is new. This means that in answer to the question 'Where did the duck go?' we would respond (a) in Greek. While if someone was asked, 'What happened at the pond?' they would choose (b).

Linguistic diversity is interesting and valuable for a number of reasons. First, it makes clear that languages differ in their structure and content. Second, looking at the range of diversity in structure and content tells us something about language more generally. It was long thought, for example, that no languages followed an OSV or OVS structure. However, in the latter parts of the 20th century, such languages were documented. Had they died out before they had been documented, linguists would have come to incorrect conclusions about what is possible in language (see Palosaari and Campbell, 2011).

2.4 THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

It is worth saying at the outset that although the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (SWH) is generally referred to as a 'hypothesis', it is not, strictly speaking, a hypothesis, as that would suggest the SWH could be testable through a scientific investigation. Further, some aspects of the SWH (called the strong version of the SWH) do not have much standing among linguists. However, there are still important insights to be gained from it. Specifically, it can help us understand how ideology and language interact.

2.4.1 Linguistic relativism and determinism

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis relies on linguistic diversity, as it considers what meanings we can attribute to this variation. The argument is that because of some aspects of linguistic diversity, different languages represent the world differently and that has consequences for how people see reality and think about the world. Sapir writes, 'The worlds in which different societies live are

distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ...' (1958 [1929]: 69). Sapir was an anthropological linguist and, as such, encountered the different ways languages represent the world. The SWH suggests that the language that people speak has an influence on the way they see the world (reality) and also how they think. That is, linguistic diversity is not just about differences among languages; the claim is that these differences have consequences.

In its simplest form, the SWH claims that the language we speak has an influence on the way we think. This is controversial in a number of ways. The first thing to consider is how much of an influence language might have on thought. The 'strong' interpretation of the SWH is often called **linguistic determinism**, meaning that the language you speak determines the way you think.³ This suggests that if there is concept that your language does not have a word for, it is impossible for you to imagine it. This is the concept that underlies the language called 'Newspeak' that is a feature of the world described in George Orwell's novel 1984. In this fictional world, the government provides inhabitants with 'Newspeak, a very specific stock of words that are supposed to be used in very specific ways. The government believes that by forcing the citizens to use Newspeak, the citizens will think and behave in the way that the government wishes them to.

But, as we've seen in Chapter 1, language allows us to create new meanings, whether these are words for new objects, concepts or items of specialist language. These days, the idea that a language completely determines thought is strongly questioned. It is easy to see why. If linguistic determinism were true, it would be very difficult to create new words (how could the need for them be identified?): it would also be impossible to understand concepts in other languages (like 'hygge').

The question then becomes, does language influence thought and behaviour in any way at all? Benjamin Whorf, who was an amateur linguist and fire inspector, argued that there was some connection between them. In his work, he noticed that people behave according to the way things are labelled rather than in terms of what they really are. The best-known example from his work as a fire inspector is the way individuals threw cigarette butts into oil drums labelled 'empty'. Even though 'empty' may signal a benign absence, in the case of oil and other flammable materials, even a small amount of residual material in the functionally 'empty' container can be anything but benign. As Whorf puts it, the "empty" drums are perhaps the more dangerous, since they contain explosive vapour' (1954: 198). Despite the very real danger, the 'empty' sign appeared to encourage risky behaviour.

Linguistic relativism, the version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that does seem plausible, is much less confining than linguistic determinism. It suggests that language, as in the case of 'empty' in Whorf's example, does *influence* the way we think. However, if the connection between language and thought is not absolute (as determinism would have it), then how far does it go? It might help to think of linguistic relativism as relating to how language *influences* the way we normally think; rather than language *determining* thought. The linguist John Lucy uses the phrase 'habitual cognition'

(Lucy, 2005: 303) to demonstrate that linguistic determinism is not the way to explain the connection between language and thought. That is,

the broader view taken here is not that languages completely or permanently blind speakers to other aspects of reality. Rather they provide speakers with a systematic default bias in their habitual response tendencies.

(Lucy, 2005: 307)

Lucy argues that the signs and structure of language influence thought. This is a much more modest argument than that of linguistic determinism. It is also incredibly useful, not just in comparing different languages and how they represent the world, but also in paying attention to more localised and specialised language use within a language. For example, some groups of English speakers will also have a routine way of describing something that others don't:

Habitual modes of thinking can be very important. Obviously habits can be changed, but to do so takes effort and will. Moreover, generally, we're not aware of our habits of thought. Have you ever considered it unusual that we describe space in terms of 'left' and 'right', 'ahead' and 'behind', that is, in relation to a forward-facing body? You probably haven't, since this seems normal; it is habitual. In some languages, space and location are described in relation to compass points, that is, whether something is 'north' or 'south'. This is certainly a habit that we all could learn, but it would take time before it was habitual. Until then, we would probably think in terms of 'left' and 'right' and then (with the aid of a mental compass) 'translate' into the new system.

2.4.2 Numbers and things

John Lucy argues that the language we speak influences our habits of thought. Lucy has spent a great deal of time researching Yucatec, a language spoken in Mexico. Comparing the language with English, it is possible to find a number of differences. One of these is the way that numbers are used. In English, in order to indicate a different number of items, we simply modify the noun, for example: 'one cup', 'two cups' and so on. In Yucatec, when a numeral is used, it 'must be accompanied by a special form, usually referred to as a numeral classifier which typically provides crucial information about the shape or material properties of the referent of the noun' (Lucy, 1996: 50).

Example 2.3

un- tz'it kib = one long thin candle

(Lucy, 1996: 50)

We see in Example 2.3 that specifying 'one' candle is not enough. A speaker also has to specify something about the object being counted. Lucy argues that the

semantically unspecified as to essential quantifications un'i, 'almost as if [the nouns] referred to unformed substances' (1996: 50). He therefore suggests that for Example 2.3, it is possible to understand 'kib' not as 'candle' but as 'wax' so that the gloss would be 'one long thing wax' (1996: 50). As Lucy points out, we do a similar kind of thing with some mass nouns. If we want to talk about a lot of flour, we don't say 'two flours' but rather, 'two cups of flour' or something like that. For those of us not literate in Yucatec or its culture, it might be difficult to assess Lucy's argument. But Lucy designed a nice experiment that may assist.

When Yucatec speakers are asked to classify different objects, they seem to have a preference for focussing on the material of the object. Thus, if asked to pick the 'odd one out' from a wooden comb, a plastic comb and a wooden bowl, the Yucatec speaker is more likely to identify the plastic comb. An English speaker, in contrast, is more likely to focus on the shape of the objects (and thus identify the bowl as the odd one out). That is, because Yucatec speakers are forced to pay attention to the material features of an object in order to give an appropriate numeral classifier, it makes sense that this aspect of objects might be important. As Lera Boroditsky puts it, 'Languages force us to attend to certain aspects of our experience by making them grammatically obligatory. Therefore, speakers of different languages may be biased to attend to and encode different aspects of their experience while speaking' (2001: 2).

Of course, these habits can be changed. English speakers can also pay attention to the material of an object. But all things being equal, this is not what the categories of English ask us to do. So while we can do it, we don't do it as a habit.

On Twitter, you can find a hashtag called #MoreAccurateNameFor. Do be aware that some of the terms are rather explicit. But the following are some examples of 'more accurate names for' things that Twitter users have suggested. Do they make sense to you? If you used them all the time, would it change the way you think about the thing?

Water	snowman's blood
Liar	not a reliable source of information
Gloves	finger pants
Shoes	foot bags
Toddler	drawer empier
Hashtag	agenda shoehorn
Grass	earth carpet

2.5 ONE LANGUAGE, MANY WORLDS


Even in a single language like English, there are many ways of representing the world. These representations are often the result of particular habitual

Language, Society
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An Introduction

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