2
Varieties of language

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 *Global and specific statements*

Our purpose in this chapter is to see how far it is possible to describe the relations of language to society in terms of 'global' linguistic categories such as 'language X' or 'dialect Y' and global social categories like 'community Z'. To the extent that it is possible, the relations concerned can be handled in terms of these global categories, and need make no reference to the individual linguistic items, such as items of vocabulary, contained in 'language X' or to the individual members of 'community Z'. On the other hand, we shall see that it is not always possible to do so without loss of accuracy and that at least some linguistic items are socially unique – that is, there are no other items that are used by precisely the same range of speakers or under precisely the same range of circumstances. Similarly, as we saw in the last chapter, we may assume that every individual in a community has a unique language when we probe the details. To the extent that different linguistic items have different relations to society (in terms of people and circumstances), it is obviously necessary to describe these relations separately for each item. Thus on the one hand there are statements about global categories, like whole languages, and on the other hand there are statements about individual linguistic items; and in each case the statement refers to speakers either as members of some community or as individuals.

The questions that arise are complex and surprisingly hard to answer, but they are important to anyone interested in the nature of language in general or in the relations of language to society in particular. How should global linguistic categories like 'language X' be defined? How should particular instances of them be delimited? Indeed, do such categories correspond to any kind of objective reality in terms of which these questions make sense? Can distinct types of global category (for example, 'language' versus 'dialect') be distinguished? How are global categories related to one another? What do they consist of (i.e. what are they categories *of*)? How should communities be defined and delimited

for these purposes? Do communities defined on a linguistic basis have any kind of objective reality? And so on. It is still far too early to give definite answers to most of these questions, but it is possible to cast serious doubt on some widely accepted answers.

Briefly, we shall be able to show that things are much more complex than many of us linguists think, though it may well be that readers with less professional commitment to linguistics will find that their current common-sense view of language fits the facts quite well. On the other hand, many lay people are prepared to ask the 'professionals' questions such as 'Where is real Cockney spoken?' and 'Is Jamaican creole a kind of English or not?', assuming that these questions are really meaningful, whereas we shall see that they are not the kind of question that can be investigated scientifically. Thus there may be some surprises in this chapter, both for the professional and for the lay reader, at least as far as the conclusions are concerned, though many of the facts on which these conclusions are based are unsurprising.

2.1.2 *Linguistic items*

The discussion will be easier if we have some technical terms to use, as we need to distance ourselves somewhat from the concepts represented by the words *language* and *dialect*, which are a reasonable reflection of our lay culture, called 'common-sense knowledge' (see 3.1.1), but not helpful in sociolinguistics. First, we need a term for the individual 'bits of language' to which some sociolinguistic statements need to refer, where more global statements are not possible. We have already used the term LINGUISTIC ITEM (2.1.1) and shall continue to use it as a technical term.

What is a linguistic item? The answer to this question concerns the theory of language structure, and people will give different answers according to which theory they think gives the best view of language structure. Everyone would accept that there are items of vocabulary (called 'lexical items' or 'lexemes'), and that there are also sound-patterns within them and larger syntactic patterns in which they are used. For convenience we can call them 'lexical items', 'sounds' and 'constructions', and we shall see that sociolinguists have studied all three. As far as sociolinguistics is concerned, there is no important difference among them, as much the same kinds of social variation and social links are possible in each case; but non-social linguists generally treat them very differently in their theoretical models of how language 'works'. A typical view is that lexical items are listed (in a lexicon), but that sounds and constructions are defined ('generated') by general rules or principles. For example, the lexical items *cat*, *dog* and *horse* are simply listed, along with their meanings and their various other characteristics (word-class, pronunciation, etc. – just as in any

dictionary); but there is no list which contains the pattern 'word-final /r/' (as in *car* and *daughter* in accents of English where /r/ is pronounced) or the construction 'bare relative clause' (as in *the book I bought*, in contrast with a 'wh-relative clause' *the book which I bought*). Although we can recognise these patterns when they occur, and talk about them, they don't really exist in a grammar in the way that the lexical items do.

This contrast between lexical and other kinds of items immediately raises a theoretical problem: if they are treated so differently in the grammar, why should they be similar sociolinguistically? And how do the social facts combine with the linguistic ones? It is reasonably easy to include social facts about lexical items along with the linguistic facts; after all, this is what any good dictionary does with social information about dialect or style differences. But how can we extend the same treatment to sounds and constructions if these aren't recognised individually in a grammar? This is one of many challenges that sociolinguistics poses for the theories that have been developed in non-social linguistics.

Later in this chapter we shall see evidence that different linguistic items in 'the same language' can have quite different social distributions (in terms of speakers and circumstances), and we may assume that it is possible for the social distribution of a linguistic item to be *unique*. In fact it is much harder to demonstrate this than to show differences between selected items, since we should need to compare the item suspected of being unique with every other item in the same language, just to make sure that no other has the same distribution. For example, it is easy to show that the distribution of the words used in England for *she* (*she, her, hoo, shoo*) is quite different from that for the words for *am* (*am, is, be, bin*) (see the maps in Wakelin 1978: 21, 23). What is not easy, is to show that none of these forms has the same distribution (i.e. is used by exactly the same speakers under the same circumstances) as any other word. There is, however, no known mechanism which could prevent items from having unique distributions, so it seems fair to assume that at least some of them do.

2.1.3 *Varieties of language*

If one thinks of 'language' as a phenomenon including all the languages of the world, the term VARIETY OF LANGUAGE (or just VARIETY for short) can be used to refer to different manifestations of it, in just the same way as one might take 'music' as a general phenomenon and then distinguish different 'varieties of music'. What makes one variety of language different from another is the linguistic items that it includes, so we may define a variety of language as *a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution*. This definition allows us to call any of the following 'varieties of language': English,

French, London English, the English of football commentaries, the languages used by the members of a particular long-house in the north-west Amazon, the language or languages used by a particular person.

It will be seen from this list that the very general notion 'variety' includes examples of what would normally be called languages, dialects and registers (a term meaning roughly 'style', which we shall discuss in section 2.4). The advantage of having a general term to cover all these concepts is that it allows us to ask what basis there is for the distinctions among them – for instance, why do we call some varieties different languages and others different dialects of the same language? Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 will be occupied with precisely such questions, and will lead to the conclusion that there is *no* consistent basis for making the distinctions concerned. This leaves us only with the general term 'variety' for referring to things which in non-technical terms we call 'languages', 'dialects' or 'styles'.

This conclusion may seem rather radical, but the definition of 'variety' given above, and the examples given in the list, suggest even greater departures from the linguistic tradition. It will be noticed that it is consistent with the definition to treat all the languages of some multilingual speaker, or community, as a single variety, since all the linguistic items concerned have a similar social distribution – they are used by the same speaker or community. That is, a variety may be much larger than a lay 'language', including a number of different languages. Conversely, according to the definition a variety may contain just a handful of items, or even in the extreme case a single item, if it is defined in terms of the range of speakers or circumstances with which it is associated. For instance, one might define a variety consisting of those items used solely by some particular family or village. Thus a variety can be much smaller than a 'language', or even than a 'dialect'. The flexibility of the term 'variety' allows us to ask what basis there is for postulating the kinds of 'package' of linguistic items to which we conventionally give labels like 'language', 'dialect' or 'register'. Is it because the items form themselves into natural bundles, bound together by a tight set of interlocking structural relations of some kind, as has always been suggested by the 'structuralist' tradition of the twentieth century? The answer given in the following sections is again negative: the bundles into which linguistic items can be grouped are quite loosely tied, and it is easy for items to move between them, to the extent that bundles may in fact be muddled up. The extreme cases of this will be discussed in section 2.5.

In conclusion, discussions of language in relation to society will consist of statements which refer, on the 'language' side, to either individual linguistic items or varieties, which are sets of such items. There are no restrictions on the

relations among varieties – they may overlap and one variety may include another. The defining characteristic of each variety is the relevant relation to society – in other words, by whom, and when, the items concerned are used. It is an empirical question to what extent the traditional notions of 'language', 'dialect' and 'register' are matched by varieties defined in this way. As we shall see in the following sections, the match is only approximate at best, and in some societies (and individuals) it may be extremely hard to identify varieties corresponding even roughly to traditional notions.

2.1.4 'Speech communities'

It may be helpful at this point to discuss the kind of community to which varieties or items may be related. The term SPEECH COMMUNITY is widely used by sociolinguists to refer to a community based on language, but LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY is also used with the same meaning. If speech communities can be delimited, then they can be studied, and it may be possible to find interesting differences between communities which correlate with differences in their language. The study of speech communities has therefore interested linguists for some time, at least since Leonard Bloomfield wrote a chapter on speech communities in his book *Language* (1933: ch. 3). However, there has been considerable confusion and disagreement over exactly what a speech community is, as the following survey shows.

(1) The simplest definition of 'speech community' is that of John Lyons (1970: 326):

> Speech community: all the people who use a given language (or dialect).

According to this definition, speech communities may overlap (where there are bilingual individuals) and need not have any social or cultural unity. Clearly it is possible to delimit speech communities in this sense only to the extent that it is possible to delimit languages and dialects without referring to the community that speaks them.

(2) A more complex definition is given by Charles Hockett (1958: 8):

> Each language defines a speech community: the whole set of people who communicate with each other, either directly or indirectly, via the common language.

Here the criterion of communication within the community is added, so that if two communities both spoke the same language but had no contact with each other at all, they would count as different speech communities.

(3) The next definition shifts the emphasis entirely from shared language to communication. A simple form of it was given by Leonard Bloomfield (1933: 42):

> A speech community is a group of people who interact by means of speech.

This leaves open the possibility that some interact by means of one language, and others by means of another. This possibility is explicitly recognised in the definition given by John Gumperz (1962):

> We will define [linguistic community] as a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication.

(4) A later definition by Gumperz, however, introduces the requirement that there should be some specifically linguistic differences between the members of the speech community and those outside it (1968):

> the speech community: any human aggregate characterised by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use.

Unlike definition (2), this does not require that there should be just one language per speech community. The effect of putting emphasis on communication and interaction, as in these last two definitions, is that different speech communities will tend not to overlap much, in contrast with the earlier definitions where overlap automatically results from bilingualism.

(5) A different definition puts the emphasis on shared attitudes and knowledge, rather than on shared linguistic behaviour. It is given by William Labov (1972a: 120):

> The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behaviour [see 6.2 below], and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage [see 5.4.1].

Rather similar definitions, referring to shared norms and abstract patterns of variation rather than to shared speech behaviour, have been given by Dell Hymes (1972) and Michael Halliday (1972). It will be seen that this kind of definition puts emphasis on the speech community as a group of people who

feel themselves to be a community in some sense, rather than a group which only the linguist and outsider could know about, as in some of the earlier definitions.

(6) Lastly, there is an approach which avoids the term 'speech community' altogether, but refers to groups in society which have distinctive speech characteristics as well as other social characteristics. It should be noted that the groups are those which the individual speaker perceives to exist, and not necessarily those which a sociologist might discover by objective methods; and the groups need not exhaust the whole population, but may represent the *clear* cases of certain social types (i.e. the 'prototypes', in the sense of 3.2.2). This approach has been advocated by Robert Le Page (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985):

> Each individual creates the systems for his verbal behaviour so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he may wish to be identified, to the extent that
> a. he can identify the groups,
> b. he has both opportunity and ability to observe and analyse their behavioural systems,
> c. his motivation is sufficiently strong to impel him to choose, and to adapt his behaviour accordingly,
> d. he is still able to adapt his behaviour.

This is the view mentioned in 1.3.1, according to which individuals 'locate themselves in a multi-dimensional space', the dimensions being defined by the groups they can identify in their society. Unlike the 'speech communities' defined in (3), (4) and (5), these groups very definitely overlap. For instance a child may identify groups on the basis of sex, age, geography and race, and each grouping may contribute something to the particular combination of linguistic items which they select as their own language.

Our last quotation, by Dwight Bolinger, identifies these 'personal' groups as speech communities, and stresses the unlimited amount of complexity that is possible (Bolinger 1975: 333):

> There is no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship, or any of the other purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in society.

According to this view, any population (whether of a city, a village or whole state) may be expected to contain a very large number of speech communities indeed, with overlapping memberships and overlapping language systems. Indeed, Le Page's proviso a (to the extent that 'he can identify the groups') raises

the possibility that different members of the population may be aware of different groups. If we take the position that speech communities should have some kind of psychological reality for their members (as in definition (5) above), then it follows that we must identify different speech communities in the same population according to the person whose viewpoint we are taking.

We have thus moved from a very simple definition of 'speech community' to a very complex one. How do we evaluate these different definitions? One answer, of course, is that they are all 'correct', since each of them allows us to define a set of people who have something in common linguistically – a language or dialect, interaction by means of speech, a given range of varieties and rules for using them, a given range of attitudes to varieties and items. The sets of people defined on the basis of different factors may of course differ radically – one criterion allows overlapping sets, another forbids them, and so on – but there is no need to try to reconcile the different definitions with one another, as they are simply trying to reflect different phenomena. On the other hand, the fact remains that they all purport to be definitions of the same thing – the 'speech community' – and the tone of some of the definitions given above (notably that of Labov in (5)) implies that it is a matter of finding the 'true' definition ('the speech community is not defined by . . . so much as by . . . '). Moreover, the word 'community' implies more than the existence of some common property; after all, nobody would talk of the 'community' of all the people whose names begin with the letter *h*, or who have overdrawn bank accounts. To qualify as a 'community', a set of people presumably needs to be distinguished from the rest of the world by more than one property, and some of these properties have to be important from the point of view of the members' social lives. The question, then, is which of the definitions of 'speech community' lead to genuine communities in this sense.

It might be thought that they *all* do. Even taking the simplest of the definitions, according to which a speech community is simply the set of people who use a given language or dialect, it is hard to imagine such a community having nothing *but* the common language or dialect to set them off from other people – nothing in their culture, nothing to do with their history, and so on. As soon as the factor of interaction comes in, of course, it goes without saying that there will be other shared characteristics in addition to the interaction. This answer has the attraction of resolving the apparent conflict between the definitions of 'speech community', but leads inevitably to the conclusion that different speech communities intersect in complex ways with one another – for example, a community defined in terms of interaction may contain parts of several communities defined in terms of shared language varieties. It will be seen that this is in fact precisely the notion of 'speech community' as defined in

(6), so we may take (6) as the most comprehensive view which subsumes all the others, and therefore makes them unnecessary.

This conclusion may seem very satisfactory, since it reconciles conflicting definitions with one another and replaces them all by a single definition. However, it raises a serious problem, since the notion 'speech community' thus defined is very much less easy to use for making generalisations about language and speech than the kinds of community defined by the earlier definitions. What would help the sociolinguist most would be a way of identifying some kind of natural speech community with reference to which it would be possible to make all relevant generalisations, and much of sociolinguistics has in fact been carried out on the assumption that this is possible. For example, the context of Labov's definition of 'speech community' given above is a discussion of his work in New York City, which he claims can be treated as a single speech community with reference to which a large number of generalisations can be made. Indeed, he goes so far as to propose that this community shares a single 'community grammar'. Our preferred definition of 'speech community' predicts that there can be no single set of people, such as all those living in New York City, which will provide a reference point for a large number of generalisations about linguistic items: on the contrary, different generalisations will be true of differently delimited communities. It will be seen that this conclusion is amply supported by the facts and arguments of the following sections.

More seriously still, it is doubtful whether the notion 'speech community' is helpful at all. The term may in fact mislead us by implying the existence of 'real' communities 'out there', which we could discover if only we knew how. There are good reasons for rejecting this assumption:

(1) Mismatch between subjective and objective reality.
According to definition (6), communities exist only to the extent that we are aware of them, so their reality is only subjective, not objective – and may be only very loosely based on objective reality. We all have hazy notions of the way people speak in distant places of which we have little direct experience – notions such as 'Northerner' (or 'Southerner'), 'American' (or 'British'), 'Irish', 'Australian' and so on. No self-respecting dialectologist would recognise a dialect area called 'Northern' (or 'Southern') English, but some lay people certainly think in such terms, so the least we can say is that if objective communities exist, they are different from the communities that we recognise subjectively.

(2) Evidence against community grammars.
The assumption behind all the definitions except (6) is that members of the community are linguistically 'the same' in some sense, either in their use of language

or in what they know and think about language. Peter Trudgill considers this assumption (Trudgill 1983b), and rejects it on the grounds that people do not even know the linguistic details of other people who live in the same city, let alone people who live hundreds of miles away. He illustrates this conclusion from his work in Norwich, which we shall discuss later (see 5.2.3). No doubt we could illustrate the same point even for members of the same family, especially if differences between generations are taken into account.

(3) Evidence for networks.
We shall see a great deal of evidence for the importance of social networks in people's linguistic behaviour (5.4.3). A typical social network has a small cluster of people near the centre and a collection of others 'hanging on' more or less closely, and perhaps hanging on to other neighbouring networks at the same time. A community, in the sense intended by all our definitions, has a boundary (even if a hazy one), but social networks have no boundaries, not even hazy ones.

(4) Small size of the most important communities.
The last problem with the general notion of 'speech community' is that if we are looking for social groups that are clearly relevant to a person's language, by far the most important ones are also very small – their family, their friends, their neighbours, their colleagues at school or work, any clubs or local organisations they belong to. These are the most important sources of linguistic influence, especially on children, even in these days of mass communications, but they are far smaller than the 'speech communities' that linguists have tended to invoke.

The conclusion would therefore seem to be that our sociolinguistic world is not organised in terms of objective 'speech communities', even though we may think subjectively in terms of communities or social types such as 'Londoner' and 'American'. This means that the search for a 'true' definition of the speech community, or for the 'true' boundaries around some assumed speech community, is just a wild goose chase.

This discussion of speech communities has raised the fundamental question: 'Where is language?' Is it 'in' the community or 'in' the individual? The position adopted throughout this book is that language must be 'in the individual' for various reasons – because each individual is unique, because individuals use language so as to locate themselves in a multi-dimensional social space, and for a number of other reasons which will emerge later. This view is widely held by linguists, and the following quotation is fairly typical:

> . . . language, while existing to serve a social function (communication) is nevertheless seated in the minds of individuals. (Guy 1980)

The reader should know, however, that this position is controversial. Unfortunately it appears to be opposed to the view of William Labov, who (as we shall see) is the most influential of all sociolinguists. Labov takes a very clear position on this issue, as witness these remarks in a discussion of the English spoken in the American city of Philadelphia:

> . . . the English language is a property of the English speech community, which is in turn composed of many nested subcommunities. There is no doubt that Philadelphia speakers of English are members of the larger community of American English speakers, and the even larger community of all speakers of English. It might also be said that Philadelphia is in turn composed of many smaller subcommunities. But the data presented here show that the linguistic world is not indefinitely complicated. (1989: 2)

> I began this paper with a question about the possible objects of linguistic description. As far as I can see, the individual speaker is not such an object. This essay, like other studies of sociolinguistic variation, shows that individual behavior can be understood only as a reflection of the grammar of the speech community. Language is not a property of the individual, but of the community. Any description of a language must take the speech community as its object if it is to do justice to the elegance and regularity of linguistic structure. (1989: 52)

The context of these remarks is a long (and impressive) discussion of variations in a single complicated feature of the English spoken in Philadelphia, in which he shows that a representative sample of speakers hardly varies at all even on the finest details. His data are beyond dispute, but they only seem to show that individuals in Philadelphia are very similar as far as this one feature is concerned. It does not follow that Philadelphians agree on all features, nor that every human being belongs clearly to a single community, nor that every community (however defined) will show the same amount of internal agreement. Moreover, the existence of agreement among speakers does not show that 'language is not a property of the individual', any more than similarities of height or income in some population show that height and income are not really properties of the individual.

2.2 Languages

2.2.1 'Language' and 'dialect'

We shall spend the rest of this chapter looking at the most widely recognised types of language variety: 'language', 'dialect' and 'register'. We

shall see that all three types are extremely problematic, both from the point of view of finding a general definition for each one which will distinguish it from the others, and also from the point of view of finding criteria for delimiting varieties.

We first need to consider the concept 'language'. What does it mean to say that some variety is a language? This is first of all a question about popular usage: what do ordinary people mean when they say that some variety is a language? Having answered the question in this form, we may or may not wish to take 'language' as a technical term, and say how we propose to use it in sociolinguistics. We shall want to do so if we find that popular usage reflects some kind of reality to which we should like to refer in sociolinguistics, but if we come to the conclusion that popular usage reflects no such reality, then there will be no point in defining 'language' more explicitly in order to use it as a technical term.

One thing that is not in question is the importance of studying popular usage of the term 'language' simply as part of English vocabulary, along with 'well-spoken', 'chat' and other vocabulary which reflects the parts of our culture which are related to language and speech. It is part of our culture to make a distinction between 'languages' and 'dialects' – in fact, we make *two* separate, distinctions using these terms, and we may draw conclusions from this fact about our culturally inherited view of language (in the same way that we can use vocabulary as evidence for other aspects of culture – see 3.2.1).

We may contrast our culture in this respect with others where no such distinction is made. For example, according to Einar Haugen (1966), this was the case in England until the term *dialect* was borrowed in the Renaissance, as a learned word from Greek. In fact, we may see our distinction between 'language' and 'dialect' as due to the influence of Greek culture, since the distinction was developed in Greek because of the existence of a number of clearly distinct written varieties in use in Classical Greece, each associated with a different area and used for a different kind of literature. Thus the meanings of the Greek terms which were translated as 'language' and 'dialect' were in fact quite different from the meanings these words have in English now. Their equivalents in French are perhaps more similar, since the French word *dialecte* refers only to regional varieties which are written and have a literature, in contrast with regional varieties which are not written, which are called *patois*. The point of this discussion is to show that there is nothing absolute about the distinction which English happens to make between 'languages' and 'dialects' (and for readers familiar with some language other than English, this discussion will hardly have been necessary).

What then is the difference, for English speakers, between a language and a dialect? There are two separate ways of distinguishing them, and this ambiguity is a source of great confusion. (Haugen (1966) argues that the reason for the ambiguity, and the resulting confusion, is precisely the fact that 'dialect' was borrowed from Greek, where the same ambiguity existed.) On the one hand, there is a difference of *size*, because a language is larger than a dialect. That is, a variety called a language contains more items than one called a dialect. This is the sense in which we may refer to English as a language, containing the sum total of all the terms in all its dialects, with 'Standard English' as one dialect among many others (Yorkshire English, Indian English, etc.). Hence the greater 'size' of the language English.

The other contrast between 'language' and 'dialect' is a question of *prestige*, a language having prestige which a dialect lacks. If we apply the terms in this sense, Standard English (for example, the kind of English used in this book) is not a dialect at all, but a language, whereas the varieties which are not used in formal writing are dialects. Whether some variety is called a language or a dialect depends on how much prestige one thinks it has, and for most people this is a clear-cut matter, which depends on whether it is used in formal writing. Accordingly, people in Britain habitually refer to languages which are unwritten (or which they think are unwritten) as dialects, or 'mere dialects', irrespective of whether there is a (proper) language to which they are related. (It would be nonsense to use 'dialect' in this way intending its 'size' sense, of course.) The fact that we put so much weight on whether or not it is written in distinguishing between 'language' and 'dialect' is one of the interesting things that the terms show us about British culture, and we shall return to the importance of writing in 2.2.2.

2.2.2 Standard languages

It is probably fair to say that the only kind of variety which would count as a 'proper language' (in the second sense of 'language') is a *standard language*. Standard languages are interesting in as much as they have a rather special relation to society – one which is quite abnormal when seen against the context of the tens (or hundreds?) of thousands of years during which language has been used. Whereas one thinks of normal language development as taking place in a rather haphazard way, largely below the threshold of consciousness of the speakers, standard languages are the result of a direct and deliberate intervention by society. This intervention, called 'standardisation', produces a standard language where before there were just 'dialects' (in the second sense, i.e. non-standard varieties).

The notion 'standard language' is somewhat imprecise, but a typical standard language will have passed through the following processes (Haugen 1966; for a somewhat different list, see Garvin and Mathiot 1956 and Garvin 1959).

(1) *Selection* – somehow or other a particular variety must have been selected as the one to be developed into a standard language. It may be an existing variety, such as the one used in an important political or commercial centre, but it could be an amalgam of various varieties. The choice is a matter of great social and political importance, as the chosen variety necessarily gains prestige and so the people who already speak it share in this prestige. However, in some cases the chosen variety has been one with no native speakers at all – for instance, Classical Hebrew in Israel and the two modern standards for Norwegian (Haugen 1994).

(2) *Codification* – some agency such as an academy must have written dictionaries and grammar books to 'fix' the variety, so that everyone agrees on what is correct. Once codification has taken place, it becomes necessary for any ambitious citizen to learn the correct forms and not to use in writing any 'incorrect' forms that may exist in their native variety.

(3) *Elaboration of function* – it must be possible to use the selected variety in all the functions associated with central government and with writing: for example, in parliament and law courts, in bureaucratic, educational and scientific documents of all kinds and, of course, in various forms of literature. This may require extra linguistic items to be added to the variety, especially technical words, but it is also necessary to develop new conventions for *using* existing forms – how to formulate examination questions, how to write formal letters and so on.

(4) *Acceptance* – the variety has to be accepted by the relevant population as *the* variety of the community – usually, in fact, as the national language. Once this has happened, the standard language serves as a strong unifying force for the state, as a symbol of its independence of other states (assuming that its standard is unique and not shared with others), and as a marker of its difference from other states. It is precisely this symbolic function that makes states go to some lengths to develop one.

This analysis of the factors typically involved in standardisation has been quite widely accepted by sociolinguists (for more details and examples, see Fasold 1984, Milroy and Milroy 1985, Haugen 1994). However, there is ample scope for debate and disagreement about the *desirability* of certain aspects of standardisation. For instance, it is not essential either that standardisation should involve matters of *pronunciation* as well as of writing (Macaulay 1973),

or that the standard language should be presented as the only 'correct' variety (a point argued by many linguists and sociolinguists).

The present section on standard languages is the only part of this book that deals in any detail with the large-scale issues of the sociology of language (see 1.1.3), but it has been included for three reasons. Firstly, it is relevant to the discussion of the second meaning of 'language' introduced in 2.2.1 (where 'language' = 'standard language'). Secondly, it is interesting to see that language can be deliberately manipulated by society. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it brings out the *unusual* character of standard languages, which are perhaps the *least* interesting kind of language for anyone interested in the nature of human language (as most linguists are). For instance, one might almost describe standard languages as pathological in their lack of diversity. To see language in its 'natural' state, one must find a variety which is neither a standard language, nor a dialect subordinate to a standard (since these too show pathological features, notably the difficulty of making judgments in terms of the non-standard dialect without being influenced by the standard one). The irony, of course, is that academic linguistics is likely to arise only in a society with a standard language, such as Britain, the United States or France, and the *first* language to which linguists pay attention is their own – a standard one.

2.2.3 *The delimitation of languages*

We now return to the question posed at the beginning of 2.2: what does it mean to say of some variety that it is a language? We can now clarify the question by distinguishing between the two meanings of 'language' based, respectively, on prestige and size. We have already given an answer on the basis of prestige: a language is a standard language. In principle this distinction is an absolute one: either a variety is a standard language, or it is not. (It is clear, however, that some languages are more standard than others; for instance, Standard French has been more rigidly codified than Standard English.) When we turn to the other distinction, based on size, the situation is very different, since everything becomes relative – for example, in comparison with one variety a chosen variety may be large, yet compared with another it may be small. The variety containing all the items used in (English-speaking) Britain looks large compared with, say, Standard English or Cockney, but only small compared with the variety which consists of all the items used in any of the 'English-speaking' countries. This being so, the claim that a particular variety is a language, in the 'size' sense, amounts to very little. Is there, then, any way in which the distinction between 'language' and 'dialect' based on size can be made less relative? (To anticipate, our answer is that there is not.)

The obvious candidate for an extra criterion is that of *mutual intelligibility*. If the speakers of two varieties can understand each other, then the varieties concerned are instances of the same language; otherwise they are not. This is a widely used criterion, but it cannot be taken seriously because there are such serious problems in its application (Simpson 1994a).

(1) Even *popular usage* does not correspond consistently to this criterion, since varieties which we (as lay people) call different languages may be mutually intelligible (for example, the Scandinavian languages, excluding Finnish and Lapp) and varieties which we call instances of the same language may not (for example, the so-called 'dialects' of Chinese). Popular usage tends to reflect the other definition of language, based on prestige, so that if two varieties are both standard languages, or are subordinate to different standards, they must be different languages, and conversely they must be the same language if they are both subordinate to the same standard. This explains the difference between our ideas on the varieties of Scandinavia and of China: each Scandinavian country has a separate standard language (indeed, as we have just seen, Norway has *two*), whereas the whole of China only has one.

(2) Mutual intelligibility is a matter of *degree*, ranging from total intelligibility down to total unintelligibility. How high up this scale do two varieties need to be in order to count as members of the same language? This is clearly a question which is best avoided, rather than answered, since any answer must be arbitrary.

(3) Varieties may be arranged in a DIALECT CONTINUUM, a chain of adjacent varieties in which each pair of adjacent varieties are mutually intelligible, but pairs taken from opposite ends of the chain are not. One such continuum is said to stretch from Amsterdam through Germany to Vienna, and another from Calais to the south of Italy. The criterion of mutual intelligibility is, however, based on a relationship between languages that is logically different from that of sameness of language, which it is supposed to illuminate. If A is the same language as B, and B is the same language as C, then A and C must also be the same language, and so on. 'Sameness of language' is therefore a transitive relation, but 'mutual intelligibility' is an intransitive one: if A and B are mutually intelligible, and B and C are mutually intelligible, C and A are not necessarily mutually intelligible. The problem is that an intransitive relation cannot be used to elucidate a transitive relation.

(4) Mutual intelligibility is not really a relation between varieties, but between people, since it is they, and not the varieties, that understand one another. This being so, the degree of mutual intelligibility depends not just on the amount of overlap between the items in the two varieties, but on qualities of the people

concerned. One highly relevant quality is *motivation*: how much does person A want to understand person B? This will depend on numerous factors such as how much A likes B, how far they wish to emphasise the cultural differences or similarities between them and so on. Motivation is important because understanding another person always requires effort on the part of the hearer – as witness the possibility of 'switching off' when one's motivation is low. The greater the difference between the varieties concerned, the more effort is needed, so if A cannot understand B, this simply tells us that the task was too great for A's motivation, and we do not know what would have happened if their motivation had been higher. Another relevant quality of the hearer is *experience*: how much experience have they had of the variety to which they are listening? Obviously, the greater the previous experience, the greater the likelihood of understanding it.

Both of these qualities raise another problem regarding the use of mutual intelligibility as a criterion, namely that it *need not be reciprocal*, since A and B need not have the same degree of motivation for understanding each other, nor need they have the same amount of previous experience of each other's varieties. Typically, it is easier for non-standard speakers to understand standard speakers than the other way round, partly because the former will have had more experience of the standard variety (notably through the media) than vice versa, and partly because they may be motivated to minimise the cultural differences between themselves and the standard speakers (though this is by no means necessarily so), while standard speakers may want to emphasise these differences.

In conclusion, mutual intelligibility does not work as a criterion for delimiting languages in the 'size' sense. There is no other criterion which is worth considering as an alternative, so we must conclude (with Matthews 1979: 47) that *there is no real distinction to be drawn between 'language' and 'dialect'* (except with reference to prestige, where it would be better to use the term 'standard (language)', rather than just 'language'). In other words, the search for language boundaries is a waste of time. Where the boundary between two languages is clear to sociolinguists, it is clear to everybody else as well – for example, there is no doubt that the languages spoken on opposite sides of the English Channel are different, but you don't need to be a sociolinguist to be sure of that. And where a boundary is unclear to ordinary people, it is equally unclear to sociolinguists. We can't assume that the phenomenon 'language' always reaches us neatly packaged into 'language-sized' bundles. All we can assume is that there are varieties of language, and that a given variety may be relatively similar to some other varieties and relatively different from others.

2.2.4 *The family tree model*

A convenient way of representing the relationships among varieties is in terms of the *family tree model*, which was developed in the nineteenth century as an aid in the historical study of languages (for an excellent discussion, see Bynon 1977: 63). This model allows one to show how closely a number of varieties are related to one another – that is, how far each has diverged from the others as a result of historical changes. For instance, one might take English, German, Welsh, French and Hindu as the varieties to be related. By building a tree structure on top of these varieties, as in Figure 2.1, one can show that English is related most closely to German, less closely to Welsh and French and still less closely to Hindi. (For a fuller picture of the relations among these and many other 'Indo-European' languages, see Crystal 1987: 296–301.)

Chinese has been added to show that it is not related *at all* to the other languages. If one includes two varieties in the same tree there is an assumption that they are both 'descended', through historical changes, from a common 'ancestor' variety, which could be named on the diagram. Thus we could add the name 'Proto-Indo-European' to the node at the top of the tree, showing that all the varieties named at the bottom (except Chinese) are descended from this one variety. Similarly, we could label the node dominating English and German 'Proto-Germanic', to give a name to the variety from which they are both descended.

The main value of the family tree model for historical linguistics is that it clarifies the historical relations among the varieties concerned, and in particular that it gives a clear idea of the relative chronology of the historical changes by which the varieties concerned have diverged. From the present point of view, however, the advantage is that a family tree shows a *hierarchical* relation among varieties which makes no distinction between 'languages' and 'dialects'. Indeed, it is common in historical linguistics to refer to the varieties which are descended from Latin as 'dialects' of Latin (or 'the Romance dialects'), although they include such obvious 'languages' (in the prestige sense) as Standard French. If we had wished to add Yorkshire English and Cockney to

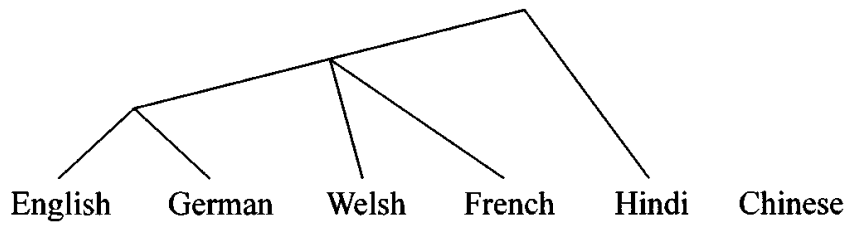

Figure 2.1

our list of varieties, we would simply have added them below English, without giving them a different status from the others.

Apart from the attraction which we have just noted, however, the family tree model has little to recommend it to the sociolinguist, since it represents a gross simplification of the relations between varieties. In particular, it makes no allowances for one variety *influencing* another, which can lead in extreme cases to *convergence* – a single variety being descended from two separate varieties. We shall see in 2.5 that this does in fact happen, and in 2.3.2 we shall introduce a better model, the 'wave theory'.

2.3 Dialects

2.3.1 Regional dialects and isoglosses

Having rejected the distinction between 'language' and 'dialect' (except with reference to prestige), we can now turn to an even more fundamental question: how clear are the boundaries between varieties? The hierarchical model of the family tree implies that the boundaries between varieties are clear at all levels of the tree. Is this so? In particular, is it possible to continue such a tree downwards, revealing smaller and smaller varieties, until one comes to the level of the individual speaker (the 'idiolect')? The answer must be no.

If we consider the most straightforward variety differences based on geography, it should be possible, if the family tree model is right, to identify what are called REGIONAL DIALECTS within any larger variety such as English. Fortunately, there is a vast amount of evidence bearing on this question, produced by the discipline called DIALECTOLOGY, particularly by its branch called DIALECT GEOGRAPHY (see, for example, Bloomfield 1993: ch. 19, Chambers and Trudgill 1980, Hocket 1958: ch. 56; see also 5.4.2 below). Since the nineteenth century, dialectologists in Europe and the United States (and, on a smaller scale, in Britain) have been studying the geographical distribution of linguistic items, such as pairs of synonymous words (for example, *pail* versus *bucket*), or different pronunciations of the same word, such as *farm* with or without the /r/. Their results are plotted on a map, showing which items were found in which villages (since dialect geography tends to concentrate on rural areas to avoid the complexities of towns). The dialect geographer may then draw a line between the area where one item was found and areas where others were found, showing a boundary for each area called an ISOGLOSS (from Greek *iso-* 'same' and *gloss-* 'tongue').

The family tree model allows a very important prediction to be made regarding isoglosses, namely that they should not intersect. Distinctions can add further subdivisions within a variety, but they cannot subdivide two varieties at the same time for the simple reason that a tree diagram can show

subclassification, but not cross-classification. You cannot use a tree, for example, to divide English both on a north–south axis and also on an east–west axis. (Try it!) According to the family tree model, then, isoglosses should never intersect, because if they did they would be dividing the same population in two contradictory ways (just as if we first split it according to sex and then according to age, which is impossible to show in a single tree). Unfortunately this prediction is wrong; in fact, it could hardly be further from reality, because cross-classification is the normal, most common relationship among isoglosses. To take just one example, there are two isoglosses in southern England which intersect, as shown in Map 2.1 on p. 40 (based on Trudgill 1974/1983: 171 and Wakelin 1978: 9). One isogloss separates the area (to the north) where *come* is pronounced with the same vowel as *stood*, from the area where it has the open vowel [Λ], as in Received Pronunciation (RP), the prestige accent of England. The other isogloss separates the area (to the north-east) where *r* of *farm* is not pronounced, from the area where it is. The only way to reconcile this kind of pattern with the family tree model would be to give priority to one isogloss over the other, but such a choice would be arbitrary and would in any case leave the subordinate isoglosses unconnected, each representing a subdivision of a different variety, whereas in fact each clearly represents a single phenomenon. Examples like this could be multiplied almost indefinitely (for another particularly clear example, see the map in Bolinger 1975: 349; and for a scholarly review, see Sankoff 1973a).

From such findings many dialectologists have drawn the conclusion that each item has its own distribution through the population of speakers, and that there is no reason to expect different items to have identical distributions (Bynon 1977: 190). This seems to be the only reasonable conclusion to draw from the data. But this leads to the further conclusion that isoglosses need not delimit varieties, except in the trivial sense where varieties each consist of just one item; and if we cannot rely on isoglosses to delimit varieties, what can we use?

There seems to be no alternative, and we find ourselves in a similar position to the earlier one in our discussion of languages: there is no way of delimiting varieties, and we must therefore conclude that varieties do not exist. All that exists are people and items, and people may be more or less similar to one another in the items they have in their language. Though unexciting, this conclusion is at least true, and raises incidental questions such as what determines the amount and kind of similarity between people.

2.3.2 *Diffusion and the wave theory*

An alternative to the family tree model was developed as early as the nineteenth century to account for the kind of phenomenon we have just

been considering. It is called the WAVE THEORY, and is based on the assumption that changes in language spread outwards from centres of influence to the surrounding areas in much the same way that a wave spreads from the place where a stone is dropped into a pool. This view of language change is accepted by all scholars, both in historical linguistics (Allan 1994, Simpson 1994b) and in sociolinguistics (Trudgill 1975/1983, 1986).

The wave theory explains why isoglosses intersect by postulating different geographical foci for the spread of different items. The isogloss between two items like *farm* with and without the /r/ shows where the influence of one item stops and the other takes over; on the assumption that one of the items represents an innovation, this means that the isogloss marks the furthest points which the influence of the new item has reached at the time when the dialectologist collected the data. There is no reason why innovations leading to any two different isoglosses should have started in the same place – or for that matter in the same period – so there is no particular reason why their isoglosses should not intersect. To return to the analogy, if two or more stones are dropped into a pool, there is no reason why they should fall in the same place, and there could be many different centres of influence from which ripples spread and intersect. Moreover, these centres may change with time, as different influences wax and wane. Each centre represents the source of a different innovative item from which 'waves' spread out in different directions.

The analogy fails in that waves of linguistic influence 'freeze' and stop expanding, because the influence at their point of origin is no longer strong enough to sustain them. In other words, in terms of the theory of acts of identity (see 1.3.1), the influence of an item stops when individuals choose for some reason not to identify themselves with the group which uses it. This means that – unlike the waves in a pool – the location of an isogloss may be the same

Map 2.1

one year as it was a century before since the strength of influence of the group with which it is associated may still not be strong enough to make it move any further. Moreover, an item need not be an innovation in order to influence people, since its effects depend on the social standing of the group associated with it, rather than on its newness. It is quite possible for a relatively archaic form to oust a newer one after the latter has spread. For example, in some areas of the United States the pronunciation of words like *farm* with an /r/ is currently replacing the pronunciation without /r/, although the latter is in fact the innovation (as the spelling suggests) – we shall discuss New York City as an example of such an area in 5.2.2.

Because of these reservations it seems best to abandon the analogy of the stones dropping in a pool. A more helpful analogy would perhaps be one involving different species of plants sown in a field, each spreading outwards by dispersing its seeds over a particular area. In the analogy, each item would be represented by a different species, with its own rate of seed dispersal, and an isogloss would be represented by the limit of spread of a given species. Different species would be able to coexist on the same spot (a relaxation of the normal laws of botany), but it might be necessary to designate certain species as being in competition with one another, corresponding to items which provide alternative ways of saying the same thing (like the two pronunciations of *farm*). The advantages of this analogy are that there is no need for the distribution of species in a field to be in constant change with respect to every item, and that every item may be represented in the analogy, and not just those which are innovative.

In terms of this new analogy, a linguistic innovation is a new species which has arisen (either by mutation or by being brought in from outside), and which may or may not prosper. If it does, it may spread and replace some or all of its competitors, but if it does not it may either die out or remain confined to a very small area of the field (i.e. to a very small speech community). Whether or not a species thrives depends on how strongly its representatives grow (i.e. on the power and influence of its speech community): the bigger the plants, the more seeds they produce, and the better the chances of the species conquering new territory.

2.3.3 *Social dialects*

Dialect differences are not, of course, only geographical, as has been implied in the discussion so far. There are two main sources of extra complexity. Firstly, there is geographical *mobility* – people move from one place to another, taking their dialects with them even if they modify them in the course of time to fit their new surroundings. Thus simply plotting speakers on a map may produce a more or less untidy pattern according to how mobile the

population is (a problem which is generally avoided in dialectology by selecting as informants people who were born and bred in the place where they are now living).

The second source of complexity is the fact that geography is only one of the relevant factors, others being social class, sex and age (see 5.4.2). Dialectologists, therefore, speak of SOCIAL DIALECTS, or SOCIOLECTS, to refer to non-regional differences. Because of these other factors, a speaker may be more similar in language to people from the same social group in a different area than to people from a different social group in the same area. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the hierarchical social structure of a country like Britain is that social class takes precedence over geography as a determinant of speech, so that there is far more geographical variation among people in the lower social classes than there is amongst those at the 'top' of the social heap. This has gone so far that people who have passed through the public school system (or would like to sound as though they had) typically have *no* regional traits at all in their language. This is a peculiarity of Britain however, and is not found in other countries such as the United States or Germany, where 'top people' show their region of origin at least through their pronunciation, though possibly in few other features of their language.

Pronunciation seems in general to be more sensitive to regional and social differences than grammar and vocabulary, so we make a distinction between accent and dialect, with ACCENT referring to nothing but pronunciation and DIALECT referring to every other aspect of language. This allows us to distinguish between the standard dialect and non-standard dialects, while making separate statements about pronunciation in terms of accents (Wells 1982). Thus in Britain we may say that many people use a regional accent but standard dialect, and a select few use an RP accent with the same standard dialect. Great confusion results if the standard dialect, which is a matter of vocabulary, syntax and morphology, is referred to as 'RP'.

All I have done in this section is to introduce the terms 'social dialect' and 'accent', pointing out that there are linguistic differences between speakers which are due not only to geography but also to other social factors. The problems with delimiting regional dialects can also be paralleled for social dialects, as we shall see in chapter 5. It would be hard to draw isoglosses for social dialects, since one would need to plot them on a many-dimensional map, but there is no reason to doubt that, could such a map be drawn, we should again find that each isogloss follows a unique path. Consequently we must reject the notions represented by both 'social dialect' and 'accent', for the same reason as we rejected the notion of a regional dialect, except as a very rough and ready way of referring to phenomena.

2.3.4 *Types of linguistic item*

One of the most interesting questions which this whole discussion of varieties raises is whether all linguistic items are subject to variation in the same way. In referring to the notion 'accent' we have already suggested that there may be a general difference between items of pronunciation and other items (morphology, syntax, vocabulary), in that pronunciation is less liable to standardisation. Given the special connection between standardisation and writing, it would not be surprising if this were so.

Pronunciation seems to have a different social function from other types of item. For example, despite the manifest influence of the United States on Britain, its influence on British English is restricted almost entirely to vocabulary and appears to have had no effect at all on the pronunciation of even the most susceptible groups, such as teenagers. As Trudgill (1983c) has shown, even radio disc-jockeys and pop singers only put on American accents when singing or disc-jockeying!

It may be, then, that pronunciation and other items play different roles in the individual's acts of identity to which we referred above. For instance, it could be that we use pronunciation in order to identify our origins (or to *imply* that we originated from some group, whether we really did or not). In contrast, we might use morphology, syntax and vocabulary in order to identify our current status in society, such as the amount of education we have had. At present this is conjecture, but there is enough evidence for differences between pronunciation and other areas of language to make it worth looking for general explanations. As already suggested, the difference may be simply an artefact of the standardisation process, so it is important to look for evidence from societies not affected by standardisation. If such differences are found even there, then we may assume that we have discovered a fundamental, and rather mysterious, fact about language.

Pursuing this 'social' comparison of the major divisions of language, is there any evidence for the view that syntax is more resistant to variation than either morphology or vocabulary? It is certainly the case that examples of syntactic differences within a variety are much less frequently quoted in the literature than differences in either pronunciation or morphology, which are in any case hard to keep separate (for example, is the difference between *-ing* and *-in'* in words like *coming* a difference in pronunciation or in morphology?). Moreover, differences in vocabulary are also much more frequently discussed in the literature of dialectology than are differences in syntax. It seems, then, that there is a difference between syntax and the rest of language which needs to be explained. (For more discussion of these types of variable item, see 5.3.1.)

It is important to be wary about this apparent difference, however. For one thing, the lack of references in the literature to syntactic differences could be due to the difficulty of studying such differences, since where they exist the evidence for them is relatively rare in ordinary speech and is hard to elicit directly compared, in particular, with vocabulary items. Secondly, the apparent stability of syntax could be an illusion, because there are relatively few syntactic items (i.e. constructions) compared with vocabulary items, so that even if the same *proportion* of syntactic items varied the result would be a smaller number. Thirdly, even if there is a difference between syntax and the rest of language, this could again be an artefact of the process of standardisation. However, notwithstanding all these qualifications, there does seem to be a greater tendency to uniformity in syntax than in other areas of language, which is hard to explain. Could there be a tendency for people to actively *suppress* alternatives in syntax, while positively seeking them in vocabulary?

Evidence for such a view comes from two sources. Syntactic items are rather commonly diffused across 'language' boundaries into adjacent areas. (Features which are shared in this way, and cannot be explained as the result of a common heritage from a parent language, are called AREAL FEATURES (Simpson 1994b).) For example, three adjacent languages in the Balkans (Bulgarian, Romanian and Albanian) all have the rather unusual property of a suffixed definite article; thus in Albanian *mik* is 'friend' and *mik-u* is 'the friend'. This shared feature can only be explained by diffusion in the relatively recent past (at least since Latin, from which Romanian is derived). Features presumably spread across language boundaries as the result of bilingualism, and the prevalence of syntactic features among areal features may be due to the tendency among bilingual individuals to mix languages in mid-sentence (2.5.1). The more similar the sentence-structures are in the two languages, the easier this is; so language-mixing may encourage the suppression of syntactic differences. The areal diffusion of syntactic features is otherwise rather hard to understand, since syntax generally seems to be relatively impervious to historical change.

Another piece of evidence for the view that we actively suppress alternatives in syntax is reported by John Gumperz and Robert Wilson (1971) from Kupwar, a small village in India, whose 3,000 inhabitants between them speak three languages: Marathi and Urdu, which are both Indo-European, and Kannada, which is not. (A small number also speak a non-Indo-European, language, Telugu.) As usual in India, the village is divided into clearly distinct groups (castes), each of which can be identified by its language. However, the different groups obviously need to communicate with each other, and bilingualism (or trilingualism) is common, especially among the men. These languages have coexisted in this way for centuries, but in spite of this contact they are still

totally distinct in *vocabulary*. Gumperz and Wilson suggest that the reason for this is that the linguistic differences serve as a useful symbol of the caste differences, which are very strictly maintained; thus vocabulary has the role of distinguishing social groups, without which the demands of efficiency in communication would presumably have gradually eroded the differences in vocabulary over the centuries. As far as *syntax* is concerned, however, the three main languages have become much more similar in Kupwar than they are elsewhere. For example, in standard Kannada, sentences like *The postman is my best friend* do not contain a word for 'is', whereas in Urdu and Marathi they do; but in the Kannada of Kupwar there is a word for *is*, on the model of Urdu and Marathi. This example seems to support our hypothesis that differences in syntax tend to be suppressed, whereas those in vocabulary and pronunciation tend to be favoured and used as markers of social differences. There do not appear to be any examples of communities in which this relationship is reversed, with less variation in vocabulary and pronunciation than in syntax.

A very tentative hypothesis thus emerges regarding the different types of linguistic items and their relations to society, according to which *syntax* is the marker of cohesion in society, with individuals trying to eliminate alternatives in syntax from their individual language. In contrast, *vocabulary* is a marker of divisions in society, and individuals may actively cultivate alternatives in order to make more subtle social distinctions. *Pronunciation* reflects the permanent social group with which the speaker identifies. This results in a tendency for individuals to suppress alternatives, but in contrast to the tendency with syntax, different groups suppress different alternatives in order to distinguish themselves from each other, and individuals keep some alternatives 'alive' in order to be able to identify their origins even more precisely, by using them in a particular and distinctive proportion relative to other alternatives. Unbelievable though this may at first seem, it is certainly one way in which pronunciation variables are used, as we shall see in chapter 5.

The main reason for putting the above suggestions forward here is to show that it is possible to formulate interesting and researchable hypotheses against the background of the view of language which we are developing, in spite of our rejection of the concepts 'language X', 'dialect X' or even 'variety X'.

2.4 Registers

2.4.1 Registers and dialects

The term REGISTER is widely used in sociolinguistics to refer to 'varieties according to use', in contrast with dialects, defined as 'varieties according to user' (Cheshire 1992, Downes 1994, Biber 1988). The distinction is needed because the same person may use very different linguistic items to

express more or less the same meaning on different occasions, and the concept of 'dialect' cannot reasonably be extended to include such variation. For instance, in writing one letter a person might start: 'I am writing to inform you that . . . ', but in another the same person might write: 'I just wanted to let you know that . . . '. Such examples could be multiplied endlessly, and suggest that the amount of variation due to register differences (if it could somehow be quantified) may be quite comparable with that due to differences in dialect.

We can interpret register differences in terms of the model of acts of identity in much the same way as for dialect differences. Each time we speak or write we not only locate ourselves in relation to the rest of society, but we also relate our act of communication itself to a complex classificatory scheme of communicative behaviour. This scheme takes the form of a multi-dimensional matrix, just like the map of our society which we each build in our mind (see 1.3.1). At the risk of slight oversimplification, we may say that your dialect shows who (or what) you *are*, whilst your register shows what you are *doing* (though these concepts are much less distinct than the slogan implies, as we shall see on page 47).

The 'dimensions' on which an act of communication may be located are no less complex than those relevant to the social location of the speaker. Michael Halliday (1978: 33) distinguishes three general types of dimension: 'field', 'mode' and 'tenor'. FIELD is concerned with the *purpose* and *subject-matter* of the communication; MODE refers to the *means* by which communication takes place – notably, by speech or writing; and TENOR depends on the *relations* between participants. Once again, a slogan may help: field refers to 'why' and 'about what' a communication takes place; mode is about 'how'; and tenor is about 'to whom' (i.e. how the speaker views the person addressed). In terms of this model, the two examples of letter-openings cited above would differ in tenor, one being impersonal (addressed to someone with whom the writer only has formal relations) and the other personal, but their field and mode are the same.

According to this model, register differences are at least three-dimensional. Another widely used model has been proposed by Dell Hymes (1972), in which no less than thirteen separate variables determine the linguistic items selected by a speaker, apart from the variable of 'dialect'. It is very doubtful if even this number reflects all the complexities of register differences. Nevertheless, each of these models provides a framework within which any relevant dimensions of similarity and difference may be located. For example, the relations between speaker and 'addressee' involve more than one such dimension (as we shall see in 4.2.2), including the dimension of 'power', on which the addressee is subordinate, equal or superior to the speaker, and the dimension called 'solidarity',

which distinguishes relatively intimate relations from more distant ones. In English speakers locate themselves on these two dimensions in relation to addressees largely by choosing among the alternative ways of naming the addressee – *Mr Smith, sir, John, mate* and so on.

We have so far presented the concept of 'register' in the way in which it is normally used, as the name of one kind of variety that is parallel to 'dialect'. However, we have already shown that dialects do not exist as discrete varieties, so we must ask whether registers do. The answer is, predictably, that they do not seem to have any more reality than dialects. For example, it is easy to see that the selection of items within a given sentence reflects different factors, depending on which items are involved. One item may, for instance, reflect the formality of the occasion, while another reflects the expertise of the speaker and addressee. This is the case in a sentence like *We obtained some sodium chloride*, where *obtained* is a formal word (in contrast with *got*) and *sodium chloride* is a technical expression (in contrast with *salt*). The dimension of formality is totally independent of the dimension of technicality, so four combinations of formality with technicality can be illustrated by the following perfectly normal sentences:

formal, technical	*We obtained some sodium chloride.*
formal, non-technical	*We obtained some salt.*
informal, technical	*We got some sodium chloride.*
informal, non-technical	*We got some salt.*

Simple examples like these suggest that different linguistic items are sensitive to different aspects of the act of communication, in the same way that different items react to different properties of the speaker (5.4.2). We can only speak of registers as varieties in the rather weak sense of sets of linguistic items which all have the same social distribution, i.e. all occur under the same circumstances. This is a far cry from the notion of variety in which speakers stick to one variety throughout a stretch of speech, speaking 'one dialect' (perhaps the only one they can speak) and 'one register'. However, it is also probably fair to say that those who use the term 'register' have never really intended it to be taken in this sense, as witness the fact that all the models presented lay great stress on the need for multi-dimensional analysis of registers.

Another point of similarity between dialects and registers is that they overlap considerably – one person's dialect is another person's register. For example, the items which one person uses under all circumstances, however informal, may be used by someone else only on the most formal occasions. This is the relation between 'native' speakers of standard and non-standard dialects.

Forms which are part of the standard speaker's 'dialect' are part of a special 'register' for the non-standard speaker – a serious social inequality (6.3).

In conclusion, we have now developed a model of language which is radically different from the one based on the notion 'variety'. In the latter, any given text may reasonably be expected to represent just one variety (though it is recognised that 'code-switching' may take place; see 2.5), and for any given variety it is possible to write a grammar – a description covering all types of linguistic item found in texts which represent that variety.

We may call this the VARIETY-BASED view of language in contrast with the ITEM-BASED view which we have developed so far in this book. Figure 2.2 illustrates the variety-based view. It shows just two linguistic items, related in some kind of linguistic structure (shown by the diagonal lines), but of course the reality involves tens of thousands of items for each speaker – possibly hundreds of thousands if they are multilingual. The little stick person is meant to stand for one of the many social categories that linguistic items may be related to – for example, one particular type of person. The horizontal line shows the relationship between this social category and the linguistic items; in most cases the relationship is that this kind of person is the typical speaker of this kind of language, but other relationships are also possible as we shall see in 4.2. The circle around the two linguistic items stands for a variety of language which in this case we have called 'language L'. The main point to notice in this diagram is that linguistic items are not linked directly to social categories, but only indirectly via language L; it is whole languages (or other varieties), and not individual linguistic items, that have social significance. This is actually equivalent to denying the need for sociolinguistics (as opposed to the sociology of language).

Now compare this with Figure 2.3, for the item-based view. Here the organisation of the linguistic items is the same, but the dotted circle shows that language L plays a much less important role – in fact, in the case illustrated it plays no role at all, because each item is linked directly to the social category

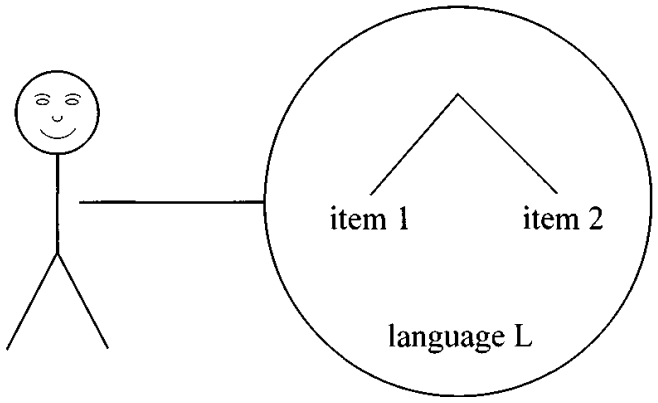

Figure 2.2

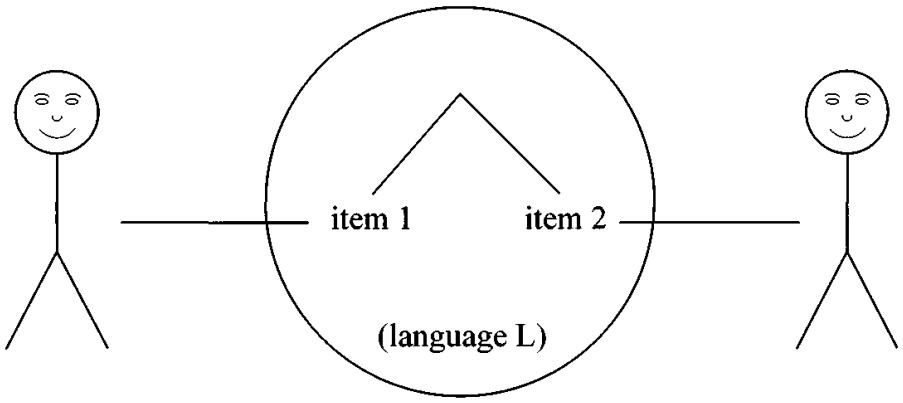

Figure 2.3

which is relevant to it. In this view the notion 'linguistic variety' is an optional extra, available when needed to capture generalisations that apply to very large collections of linguistic items, but by no means the only mechanism, or even the most important mechanism, for linking linguistic items to their social context.

2.4.2 *Diglossia*

Having emphasised the theoretical possibility of each individual linguistic item having its own unique social distribution among the various circumstances of use, it is now important to report that this possibility need not be exploited, and that in some societies there is a relatively simple arrangement called DIGLOSSIA in which at least one type of social restriction on items can be expressed in terms of large-scale 'varieties', rather than item by item. The term 'diglossia' was introduced into the English-language literature on sociolinguistics by Charles Ferguson (1959) in order to describe the situation found in places like Greece, the Arabic-speaking world in general, German-speaking Switzerland and the island of Haiti – a list which can easily be extended (A. Hudson 1994). In all these societies there are two distinct varieties, sufficiently distinct for lay people to call them separate languages, of which one is used only on formal and public occasions while the other is used by *everybody* under normal, everyday circumstances. The two varieties are normally called 'High' and 'Low', or 'standard' and 'vernacular'. Ferguson's definition of diglossia is as follows:

> Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education

> and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

For example, in an Arabic-speaking diglossic community, the language used at home is a local version of Arabic (there may be very great differences between one 'dialect' of Arabic and another, to the point of mutual incomprehensibility), with little variation between the most educated and the least educated speakers. However, in a lecture at a university, or a sermon in a mosque, the only possibility is Standard Arabic, a variety different at all levels from the local vernacular, and felt to be so different from the 'Low' variety that it is taught in schools in the way that foreign languages are taught in English-speaking societies. Likewise, when children learn to read and write, it is the standard language, and not the local vernacular, which they are taught.

The most obvious difference between diglossic and English-speaking societies is that no one in the former has the advantage of learning the High variety (as used on formal occasions and in education) as their first language, since everyone speaks the Low variety at home. Consequently, the way to acquire a High variety in such a society is not by being born into the right kind of family, but by going to school. Of course, there are still differences between families in their ability to afford education, so diglossia does not guarantee linguistic equality between poor and rich, but the differences emerge only in formal public situations requiring the High variety. We shall have more to say about the situation in non-diglossic societies in 6.2 and 6.3.

It will be noticed that the definition of 'diglossia' given by Ferguson is quite specific on several points. For example, he requires that the High and Low varieties should belong to the same language, for example, Standard (or Classical) and Colloquial Arabic. However, some writers have extended the term to cover situations which do not strictly count as diglossic according to this definition. Joshua Fishman, for example, refers to Paraguay as an example of a diglossic community (1971: 75), although the High and Low varieties are respectively Spanish and Guaraní, an Indian language totally unrelated to Spanish. Since we have argued that there is no real distinction between varieties of one language and of different languages, this relaxation seems quite reasonable.

However, Fishman (following John Gumperz) also extends the term diglossia to include any society in which two or more varieties are used under distinct circumstances (1971: 74). This may be a regrettable development, as it would seem to make *every* society diglossic, including even English-speaking England (i.e. excluding communities with other languages as their mother tongues), where different so-called 'registers' and 'dialects' are used under different

circumstances (compare a sermon with a sports report, for example). The value of the concept of diglossia is that it can be used in sociolinguistic *typology* – that is, in the classification of communities according to the type of sociolinguistic pattern that prevails in them – and 'diglossia' provides a revealing contrast with the kind of pattern found in countries such as Britain and the United States, which we might call 'social-dialectia' to show that the 'varieties' concerned were social dialects, not registers.

Another important difference between Ferguson's classic diglossia and social-dialectia is that the varieties concerned are more sharply distinguished in the former. Whereas social dialects turn out to dissolve into a myriad of independently varying items, the items involved in diglossia all vary together so that their variations can be generalised satisfactorily in terms of large-scale varieties. However, even in diglossic communities it would be surprising if there were no intermediate cases, and the distinction between the types of community is probably less clear than this discussion implies.

2.5 Mixture of varieties

2.5.1 *Code-switching*

We have been concerned so far in this chapter with the status of 'varieties' in the language system – to what extent is our collection of linguistic items compartmentalised into separate varieties, each with its own social links, and to what extent are social links restricted to these large-scale varieties, rather than the individual linguistic items? The effect of the earlier discussion was to give varieties a relatively unimportant role in the language system, though we did not deny their existence altogether. We now turn to a different kind of question about varieties: even when we can recognise varieties as clearly distinct languages (for example, English versus Spanish), to what extent do their speakers keep them separate? This divides into two separate questions: do they keep them separate in speech? and do they keep them separate as language systems? The first two sections are concerned with the first question: are languages always kept separate in speech? Here too we find that the variety-based view is far too rigid to do justice to human linguistic behaviour.

We start with CODE-SWITCHING, which is the inevitable consequence of bilingualism (or, more generally, multilingualism). (For a brief but very helpful survey see McCormick 1994a. Romaine 1989 is a good book-length discussion of this and other consequences of bilingualism.) Anyone who speaks more than one language chooses between them according to circumstances. The first consideration, of course, is which language will be comprehensible to the person addressed; generally speaking, speakers choose a language which the other person can understand (though interesting exceptions arise for example in

religious ceremonies). But what about members of a community where everybody speaks the same range of languages? In community multilingualism the different languages are always used in different circumstances, and the choice is always controlled by social rules. Typically one language is reserved exclusively for use at home and another is used in the wider community (for example, when shopping); for example, according to Denison (1971), everyone in the village of Sauris, in northern Italy, spoke German within the family, Saurian (a dialect of Italian) informally within the village, and standard Italian to outsiders and in more formal village settings (school, church, work). Because of this linguistic division of labour, each individual could expect to switch codes (i.e. languages) several times in the course of a day. (The term 'code-switching' is preferred to 'language-switching' in order to accommodate other kinds of variety: dialects and registers.)

More precisely, this kind of code-switching is called SITUATIONAL code-switching because the switches between languages always coincide with changes from one external situation (for example, talking to members of the family) to another (for example, talking to the neighbours). The choice of language is controlled by rules, which members of the community learn from their experience, so these rules are part of their total linguistic knowledge. Now a very obvious question arises: why should a whole community bother to learn three different languages, when just one language would do? If everyone in Sauris knows standard Italian, why don't they stick to this all the time and let the local German and Italian dialects disappear? No doubt Saurians themselves have a clear answer: standard Italian would just feel wrong at home. The rules link the languages to different communities (home, Sauris, Italy), so each language also symbolises that community. Speaking standard Italian at home would be like wearing a suit, and speaking German in the village would be like wearing beach-clothes in church. In short, each language has a social function which no other language could fulfil. These social functions are more or less arbitrary results of history, but they are no less real for that. The same seems to be typical of bilingual communities in general. The main reason for preserving the languages is because of the social distinctions that they symbolise. (We saw another example of the same pattern in the discussion of the Indian village Kupwar, where three languages are used in order to maintain the caste system – see 2.3.4.)

Given this heavy symbolic load that languages bear, it is entirely to be expected that bilingual speakers will use their choice of language in order to define the situation, rather than letting the situation define the choice of languages. In clear cases, we can tell what situation we are in just by looking around us; for example, if we are in a lecture-room full of people, or having breakfast

with our family, classifying the situation is easy, and if language choice varies with the situation it is clearly the situation that decides the language, not the other way round. But in some cases the situation is less clear, either because it is ambiguous or because the speaker decides to ignore the observable external situation and focus instead on less observable characteristics of the people concerned. Such cases, where it is the choice of language that determines the situation, are called METAPHORICAL CODE-SWITCHING (Blom and Gumperz 1971).

An example which is quoted by Jan-Petter Blom and John Gumperz arose out of their research in a town in northern Norway, Hemnesberget, where there is a diglossic situation, with one of the two standard Norwegian languages (Bokmål) as the High variety and a local dialect, Ranamal, as the Low one.

> In the course of a morning spent at the community administration office, we noticed that clerks used both standard and dialect phrases, depending on whether they were talking about official affairs or not. Likewise, when residents step up to a clerk's desk, greeting and inquiries about family affairs tend to be exchanged in the dialect, while the business part of the transaction is carried on in the standard. (Blom and Gumperz 1971: 425)

Examples like this show that speakers are able to manipulate the norms governing the use of varieties in just the same way as they can manipulate those governing the meanings of words by using them metaphorically. This is something everyone knows from everyday experience, but it is worth explicit reference in a book on sociolinguistic theory because it helps to avoid the trap of seeing speakers as sociolinguistic robots able to talk only within the constraints laid down by the norms of their society.

2.5.2 *Code-mixing*

In code-switching the point at which the languages change corresponds to a point where the situation changes, either on its own or precisely because the language changes. There are other cases, however, where a fluent bilingual talking to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation. This kind of alternation is called CODE-MIXING (or CONVERSATIONAL CODE-SWITCHING, a rather unhelpful name). The purpose of code-mixing seems to be to symbolise a somewhat ambiguous situation for which neither language on its own would be quite right. To get the right effect the speakers balance the two languages against each other as a kind of linguistic cocktail – a few words of one language, then a few words of the other, then back to the first for a few more words and so on. The changes

generally take place more or less randomly as far as subject-matter is concerned, but they seem to be limited by the sentence-structure, as we shall see.

The following is an extract from the speech of a Puerto-Rican speaker living in New York, quoted by William Labov (1971). The stretches in Spanish are translated in brackets.

> Por eso cada [therefore each . . .], you know it's nothing to be proud of, porque yo no estoy [because I'm not] proud of it, as a matter of fact I hate it, pero viene Vierne y Sabado yo estoy, tu me ve hacia mi, sola [but come (?) Friday and Saturday I am, you see me, you look at me, alone] with a, aqui solita, a veces que Frankie me deja [here alone, sometimes Frankie leaves me], you know a stick or something . . .

Examples like these are interesting since they show that the syntactic categories used in classifying linguistic items may be independent of their social descriptions. For instance, in the above extract the Spanish verb *estoy* 'am' needs to be followed by an adjective, but in this case it is an English adjective (*proud*). This supports the view that at least some syntactic (and other) categories used in analysing language are universal rather than tied to particular languages.

An even clearer example of conversational code-switching within a single sentence is quoted by Gillian Sankoff, from a speech by an entrepreneur in a village in New Guinea (Sankoff 1972: 45). Here the languages concerned are a language called Buang and Neo-Melanesian Pidgin, or Tok Pisin (to which we shall return in 2.5.3). In Buang, negation is marked by using *su* before the predicate (i.e. the verb and its objects), and *re* after it; but in one sentence (which is too long to quote here) the predicate was mostly in English, but was enclosed within the Buang *su* . . . *re* construction. Again we may conclude that items from languages even as different as Buang and Neo-Melanesian Pidgin are classified, by speakers as well as by linguists, in terms of a common set of syntactic categories (in this case something like the category 'predicate').

An important question about code-mixing is what syntactic constraints apply to it, and attempts to answer this question have constituted one of the main points of contact over the last few years between sociolinguistics and non-social linguistics. There is no doubt that there are syntactic constraints; people who belong to code-mixing communities can judge whether particular constructed code-mixed examples are permitted or not, and these judgments are on the whole born out by studies of texts. For example, both Spanish and English have a word which is used just before an infinitive (*to* in English, *a* in Spanish), and language-change is possible after either – *to* can be followed by a Spanish infinitive, and *a* by an English one. But what is apparently not possible is for a

Spanish verb which is normally followed by *a* to be followed by *to* instead (Blake 1987). This example is typical and could be multiplied from the growing literature.

The reason why code-mixing has interested non-social linguists is that these restrictions call for an explanation. Are they peculiarities of each language pair involved in mixing, or are there more general patterns that apply to all code-mixing – and if there are, what are they and why do they exist? The research is still in its infancy and the results are quite inconclusive, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that constraints vary from community to community (see, for example, Clyne 1987, Choi 1991) in spite of the enthusiastic attempts to provide universal explanations (see, for example, di Sciullo et al.. 1986, Belazi et al.. 1994).

2.5.3 *Borrowing*

Another way in which different languages may become mixed up with each other is through the process of BORROWING (Heath 1994). At this point, however, we are shifting our view from speech to language-systems. Whereas code-switching and code-mixing involved mixing languages in speech, borrowing involves mixing the systems themselves, because an item is 'borrowed' from one language to become part of the other language. Everyday examples abound – words for foods, plants, institutions, music and so on, which most people can recognise as borrowings (or LOAN-WORDS), and for which they can even name the source language. For most English speakers the following would probably be included: *karaoke* (Japanese), *paella* (Spanish), *schnapps* (German), *eisteddfod* (Welsh), *sputnik* (Russian) and *fait accompli* (French).

Examples like these are relevant to sociolinguistics because of their 'double-allegiance': we treat them as ordinary English words, used in ordinary English sentences, but at the same time we know that they are modelled on words in other languages, which gives them a more or less foreign 'flavour'. We can make this rather vague description more precise by building on the discussion of code-switching and code-mixing, where we agreed that each language has a distinctive symbolic value for people who use it regularly because of its links to particular kinds of people or kinds of situation. The same can be true, to a more limited extent, of languages that we do not use regularly, and which we may hardly know at all – languages that we associate with holidays, particular kinds of culture and so on. One reason for using a word from such a language is to pretend, just for a moment, to be a native speaker with whatever social characteristics we associate with the stereotype. Another reason, of course, is that there is simply no other available word, in which case the link to the country

may be irrelevant, or at least unintended. (In some countries all loan-words are frowned upon because of their foreign associations, so steps have to be taken to invent native words with the same meaning.)

It is important to distinguish examples like these from the enormous number of words which are borrowings only in the historical sense, and which ordinary people no longer associate with any other language. Such words account for more than half of the vocabulary of English, which has borrowed a great deal from Latin, Greek and French. Words like *money*, *car*, *church* and *letter* can all be traced to borrowings from these languages, but none of us are aware of this and use them just like any other English word, without any trace of foreign associations. However it is also important to recognise that borrowings can keep their foreign associations for a very long time, whether or not we recognise them as loans. It is very easy to show this in English, where so-called 'Latinate' vocabulary is quite distinct in spelling, in morphology and in register. For example, in 2.4.1 we contrasted *get* and *obtain* as informal and formal; what we did not mention is that *obtain* was once a borrowing from Latin, whereas *get* is not. (Actually, *get* was also borrowed, but it was borrowed from Old Norse.) At the time of the borrowing Latin was the language of scholarship, the law and so on – in fact, it was the High language in a diglossic situation, with English as the Low (and French in between as the language of the Court). This being so, *obtain* had the prestige of Latin when it was borrowed – and it still has, many centuries later, even though most people do not know its origin. The same is true of most Latinate vocabulary in modern English. In sum we certainly cannot call these words 'borrowings', in the strict sense of words that ordinary users know to be borrowed, but we can at least explain the 'High' status which sets them off from the historically non-Latinate vocabulary as a relic of the mediaeval diglossia in which Latin was High.

It may be helpful to diagram these distinctions. Figure 2.4 shows the knowledge-structure for someone who knows *fait accompli*, uses it as an ordinary English word(-pair) (for example, *It's a fait accompli*), but recognises it as a French loan (for example, by using a semi-French pronunciation). The arrow pointing from the French *fait accompli* to the English one shows that the person concerned knows the historical connection between the two.

Now contrast this with Figure 2.5, for the difference between *get* and *obtain*. Here we assume that the person concerned may or may not know that *obtain* has a link to Latin (hence the question mark), but the social category to which it is linked is the same as it would have been with that link. The link to a specific Latin word is no longer known.

One curious and importance consequence of borrowing is that (once again) the boundaries between languages come into question. We have assumed so

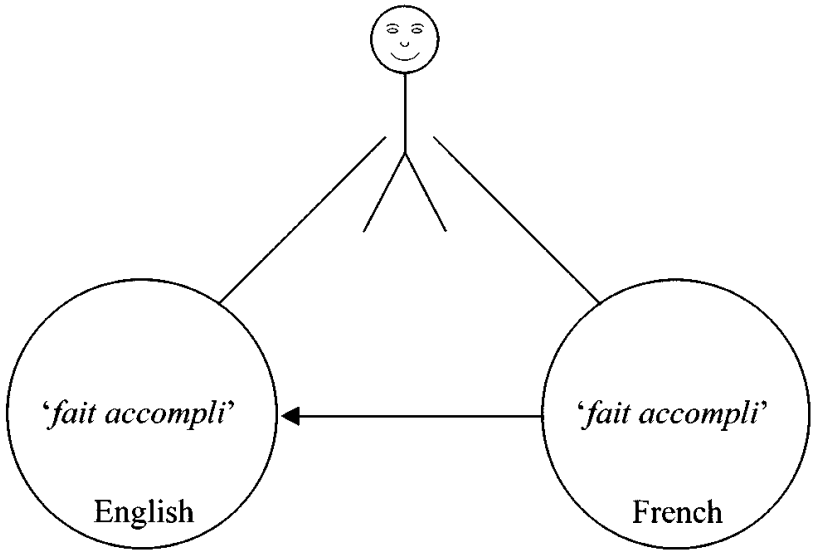

Figure 2.4

far that a loan word is definitely part of the borrowing language, but this is in fact a matter of degree. It is common for items to be *assimilated* in some degree to the items already in the borrowing variety, with foreign sounds being replaced by native sounds and so on. For instance, the word *restaurant* lost its uvular *r* when it was borrowed from French into English, so that it would occur with a uvular *r* in an English sentence only as an example of code-

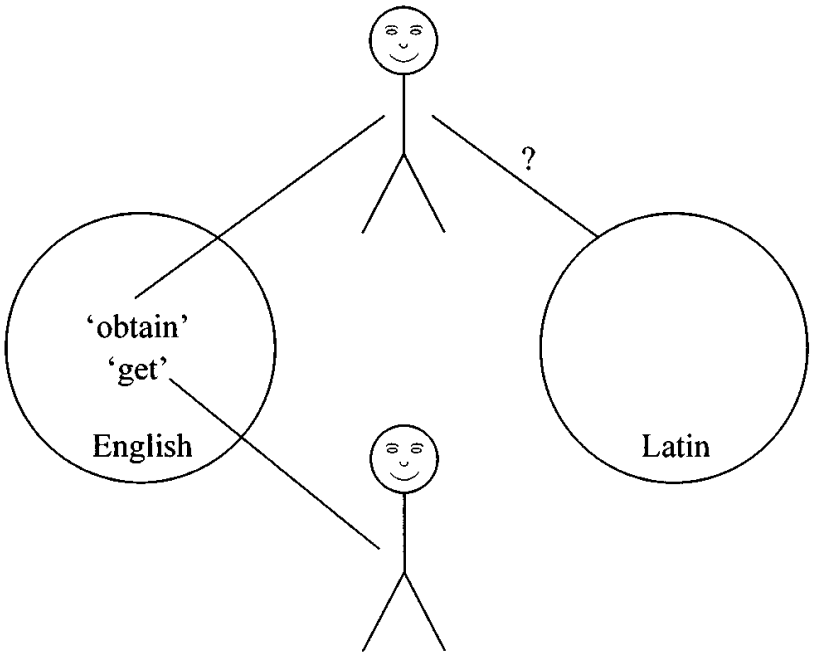

Figure 2.5

switching. On the other hand, assimilation need not be total, and in *restaurant* many English speakers still have a nasal vowel at the end, which would not have been there had the word not been borrowed from French. Words like this make it very hard to draw the neat line round 'English' which is required by any description of 'the English phoneme system', since the English system gets mixed up with systems from other languages. On the other hand, this partial assimilation of borrowed words is an extremely common phenomenon both in English and in other languages. (Consider, in British English, the velar fricative at the end of *loch* and the voiceless lateral fricatives in *Llangollen*, both of which are very unusual in English words.)

The completely unassimilated loan-word is at one end of a scale which has at the other end items bearing no formal resemblance to the foreign words on which they are based. Such items are called LOAN TRANSLATIONS (or 'calques'). For example, the English *superman* is a loan translation of the German *Übermensch*, and the expression *I've told him I don't know how many times* is a direct translation of the French *Je le lui ai dit je ne sais pas combien de fois* (Bloomfield 1933: 457). What these examples illustrate is that borrowing may involve the levels of syntax and semantics without involving pronunciation at all, which brings us back to the question of areal features, discussed in 2.3.4, where we saw that it is common for features of syntax to be borrowed from one language into neighbouring ones, via people who are bilingual in both. We now have three mechanisms which may help to explain how this happens. First, there is a tendency to eliminate alternatives in syntax (see 2.3.4). Then there is the existence of specific loan-translations like those just quoted, which may then act as models from which regular 'native' constructions can be developed. And third, there is code-mixing (2.5.2), which encourages the languages concerned to become more similar in their syntax so that items from each may be more easily substituted for one another within the same sentence; if both languages put the object on the same side of the verb, for example, code-mixing is easier than if one puts it before and the other after.

The question is, whether there are any aspects of language which *cannot* be borrowed from one language into another. The answer appears to be that there are not (Bynon 1977: 255). Even the inflectional morphology of a language may be borrowed, as witness a Tanzanian language called Mbugu which appears to have borrowed a Bantu inflectional system from one or more Bantu neighbours, although other aspects of its grammar are non-Bantu (Goodman 1971). Its non-Bantu features now include the personal pronouns and the numbers from one to six, which would normally be considered to be such 'basic' vocabulary as to be immune from borrowing (Bynon 1977: 253). In such cases there are of course problems for the family tree model, since it ought

to be possible to fit the language into just one tree, whereas some features suggest that it ought to be in the Bantu tree, and others, like those mentioned above, indicate that it belongs in some other tree (possibly the tree for 'Cushitic' languages). How should one resolve the conflict? Can any general principles be applied in balancing the evidence of inflectional morphology against that of basic vocabulary? (It should be noted, incidentally, that the inflectional morphology is matched by Bantu-type rules of concord, which are presumably part of syntax.) One wonders whether there is *any* kind of external reality against which an answer to questions such as these might be measured.

Assuming that there are no parts of language which cannot be borrowed, it is still possible to ask questions which may distinguish one part from another. For example, are there any restrictions on the circumstances under which different parts of language may be borrowed? We might suspect, for instance, that some kinds of item will be borrowed only under conditions of widespread bilingualism, while others may occur where only a few members of a society are bilingual in the relevant languages. Aspects of the first type would count as least, and the second type as most, subject to borrowing, so we could set up a scale of accessibility to borrowing, on which inflectional morphology, and 'basic vocabulary' such as small numbers, would presumably be at the 'least accessible' end, and vocabulary for artefacts (like *aeroplane* or *hamburger*) at the other. A word for the number 'one', for instance, will be borrowed only when almost everyone speaks both the 'borrowing' and the 'source' languages, whereas a word for 'aeroplane' could easily be borrowed when nobody is fully proficient in the two languages, but one or two people are familiar enough with the source language to know the word for 'aeroplane'. However, the truth may turn out to be much more complex than is suggested by this hypothesis, which is in any case by no means simple as far as the organisation of linguistic items into separate levels, such as syntax, vocabulary and phonology, is concerned, since different vocabulary items are put at opposite ends of the scale. Thus borrowing is a phenomenon which may throw light on the internal organisation of language, and certainly on the relations of language to society, once the right research has been done.

2.5.4 *Pidgins*

There is yet another way, apart from code-switching and borrowing, in which varieties may get mixed up with each other, namely by the process of creating a new variety out of two (or more) existing ones. This process of 'variety-synthesis' may take a number of different forms, including for instance the creation of artificial auxiliary languages like Esperanto and Basic English (for which see Crystal 1987: 352–5). However, by far the most important

manifestation is the process of pidginisation, whereby PIDGIN LANGUAGES, or PIDGINS, are created. These are varieties created for very practical and immediate purposes of communication between people who otherwise would have no common language whatsoever, and learned by one person from another within the communities concerned as the accepted way of communicating with members of the other community. (An excellent brief survey of the issues discussed here and in 2.5.5 is Aitchison 1994; for a scholarly survey in two volumes, see Holm 1988, 1989.)

Since the reason for wanting to communicate with members of the other communities is often trade, a pidgin may be what is called a TRADE LANGUAGE, but not all pidgins are restricted to being used as trade languages, nor are all trade languages pidgins. Instead, the ordinary language of some community in the area may be used by all the other communities as a trade language. It will be recalled from 1.2.2 that in the north-west Amazon area, Tukano is the language of one of the twenty-odd tribes but is also used as a trade language by all the others. Similarly, English and French are widely used as trade languages in many parts of Africa. In contrast with languages like this, a pidgin is a variety specially created for the purpose of communicating with some *other* group, and not used by *any* community for communication among themselves.

There are a large number of pidgin languages, spread through all the continents including Europe, where migrant workers in countries like Germany have developed pidgin varieties based on the local national language. Each pidgin is of course specially constructed to suit the needs of its users, which means that it has to have the terminology and constructions needed in whatever kinds of contact normally arise between the communities, but need not go beyond these demands to anticipate the odd occasion on which other kinds of situation arise. If the contacts concerned are restricted to the buying and selling of cattle, then only linguistic items to do with this are needed, so there will be no way of talking about the quality of vegetables, or the emotions, or any of the many other things about which one can talk in any normal language.

Another requirement of a pidgin is that it should be as simple to learn as possible, especially for those who benefit *least* from learning it, and the consequence of this is that the vocabulary is generally based on the vocabulary of the dominant group. For instance, a group of migrant workers from Turkey living in Germany will not benefit much from a pidgin whose vocabulary is based on Turkish, since few Germans would be willing to make the effort to learn it, consequently they take their vocabulary from German. Similarly, in a colonial situation where representatives of a foreign colonial power need to communicate with the local population in matters of trade or administration, and if it is in the interests of the local population to communicate, then the

pidgin which develops will be based on the vocabulary of the colonial power – hence the very large number of pidgins spread round the globe based on English, French, Portuguese and Dutch.

However, although the vocabulary of a pidgin may be based mainly on that of one of the communities concerned, the 'dominant' variety, the pidgin is still a compromise between this and the subordinate varieties, in that its syntax and phonology may be similar to the latter, making the pidgin easier for the other communities to learn than the dominant language in its ordinary form. As for morphology, this is left out altogether, which again makes for ease of learning. To the extent that differences of tense, number, case and so on are indicated at all, they are marked by the addition of separate words. Indeed, one of the most characteristic features of pidgins is the lack of morphology, and if some variety is found to contain morphology, especially inflectional morphology, most specialists in this field would be reluctant to treat it as a pidgin (which does not of course mean that every language without inflectional morphology must be a pidgin).

The best way to illustrate these characteristics of pidgins is by discussing a sentence from Tok Pisin, the English-based pidgin spoken in Papua New Guinea (Todd 1994: 3178, 4622).

> Bai em i no lukim mi. 'He will not see me.'

The English origins of the vocabulary are not immediately obvious in the official spelling, which reflects the words' current pronunciation rather than their origins, so the following notes may be helpful.

Bai	From *by and by*, an adverb used instead of the auxiliary verb *will* to indicate future time.
em	From *him*, meaning 'he'.
i	From *he*, but obligatorily added to a verb whose subject is third person (like the English suffix *-s*).
no	From *no* or *not*, used instead of the verb *doesn't*.
luk-	From *look*, but means 'see'.
-im	From *him*, but added obligatorily whenever the verb has an object, in addition to this object.
mi	From *me*.

The example shows how different the syntax is from English, but how rigidly rule-governed it is, in particular by the rules which require the redundant *i* before the verb and *-im* added to it – a far cry from the idea of a makeshift attempt at speaking English. Another point which emerges clearly is the

question of classification: is this a variety of English? Such cases highlight the general problem of deciding where the boundaries of languages lie.

Let us return to the more general question of the relation between pidgins and the societies which create them. As we have seen, pidgins are sometimes developed as trade languages, which we may take in a fairly broad sense as varieties used only for trade and administration. This is how Neo-Melanesian Pidgin or Tok Pisin (i.e., 'pidgin talk' – see 2.5.1) developed during the present century for communication between the English-speaking administrators of Papua New Guinea and the local population, who themselves speak a large number of mutually incomprehensible languages (one of which is Buang, which was involved in code-mixing with Tok Pisin in the example quoted in 2.5.2).

However, not all pidgins have arisen as trade languages, as Tok Pisin did. Another situation in which pidgins are needed is when people from different language backgrounds are thrown together and have to communicate with each other, and with a dominant group, in order to survive. This is the situation in which most Africans taken as slaves to the New World found themselves, since the slavers would break up tribal groups to minimise the risk of rebellion. Thus the only way in which the slaves could communicate either with each other or with their masters was through a pidgin which they generally learned from the slavers, based on the latter's language. Since most slaves had little opportunity to learn the ordinary language of their masters, this pidgin remained the only means of communication for most slaves for the rest of their lives. This had two consequences. One was that pidgins became very closely associated with slaves, and acquired a poor reputation as a result (and the slaves also got the reputation of being stupid since they could not speak a 'proper' language!). The other consequence was that pidgins were used in an increasingly wide range of situations, and so gradually acquired the status of creole languages (see 2.5.5).

It may be helpful to bring together some characteristics of pidgins which distinguish them from other types of variety and variety-mixture.

(1) A pidgin based on language X is not just an example of 'bad X', as one might describe the unsuccessful attempt of an individual foreigner to learn X. A pidgin is itself a language, with a community of speakers who pass it on from one generation to the next, and consequently with its own history. Indeed, it has even been suggested that many pidgins have a common origin in the Portuguese-based pidgin which developed in the Far East and West Africa during the sixteenth century, under the influence of Portuguese sailors, and that this Portuguese-based pidgin might in turn have had its roots in the 'Lingua Franca' developed in the Mediterranean as early as the Crusades. This suggestion represents one of a number of attempts to explain the existence of a fairly

large number of similar features which have been found in pidgins from many different parts of the world (Todd 1994).

(2) A pidgin is not simply the result of heavy borrowing from one variety into another, since there is no pre-existing variety into which items may be borrowed. An 'X-based pidgin' is not a variety of X which has borrowed a lot of syntactic constructions and phonological features from other varieties, since there may well be no model in these other varieties for any of the changes, such as the loss of inflections to which we referred above. Nor is it a variety of some other language which has borrowed a lot of vocabulary from X, since the syntax, phonology and morphology need not be the same as those of any of the other varieties involved. In any case, it is not clear which community would be the borrowers, since the pidgin is developed jointly by both sides of the communication gap, each trying to help bridge the gap. Of course, there is an interesting problem in relation to borrowing, since we *can* talk of borrowing into a pre-established pidgin, just as we can in connection with any other kind of variety, whereas we cannot invoke borrowing as a process in the establishment of the pidgin in the first place. The problem is that this implies too clear a distinction between the periods before and after the establishment of the pidgin.

(3) A pidgin, unlike ordinary languages, has no native speakers, which is a consequence of the fact that it is used only for communication between members of *different* communities. On the other hand, this distinction is not clear-cut since there are situations, such as those of slavery, where a community can come into existence with a pidgin as its only common variety, although all the members of the community learned it as a second language. The lack of a clearly defined group of native speakers has the effect of putting most pidgins near the 'diffuse' end of the scale contrasting 'focussing' and 'diffusion' (1.3.1), in contrast with highly focussed standard languages such as French, and this is another reason why pidgins are of such considerable interest to sociolinguists.

2.5.5 *Creoles*

A pidgin which has acquired native speakers is called a CREOLE LANGUAGE, or CREOLE, and the process whereby a pidgin turns into a creole is called 'creolisation'. It is easy to see how pidgins acquire native speakers, namely by being spoken by couples who have children and rear them together. This happened on a large scale among the African slaves taken to the New World, and is happening on a somewhat smaller scale in urban communities in places like Papua New Guinea.

From a social point of view, creoles are of more interest than pidgins. Most creole languages are spoken by the descendants of African slaves and are of great interest, both to their speakers and to others, as one of the main sources

of information on their origins, and as a symbol of their identity. A similar interest is shown by people who speak varieties whose origins are in a creole, but which have since been 'decreolised', i.e. moved towards the dominant variety at the expense of most distinctive characteristics of the creole. It is possible that the English of black people in the United States is such a variety, and because of this creoles and decreolised languages are of particular interest to many American linguists (see 1.3.2, 5.4.2 and, a good survey, Fasold 1990). Another reason for the interest in creoles is that there are minority groups, such as West Indian immigrants in Britain, whose members speak some form of creole. If their creole is one based on the majority language of the country into which they have immigrated – for example, an English-based creole in the case of immigrants to Britain – then serious educational problems may arise if neither teachers nor taught can be sure if this creole is a different language from the majority one or a dialect of it. If the former, it may be appropriate to use second-language teaching methods to teach the majority language, but this is by no means an appropriate method if it is a dialect. Consequently research is needed in order to establish the extent of the difference between the creole and the majority language. Similar problems arise in countries where the majority language is itself a creole, if the language expected by the education system is the standard version of the language on which the creole is based, as in many Caribbean countries. The problem is not helped, of course, by the fact that the difference between 'same' and 'different' is rather meaningless when applied to language varieties, as we argued in 2.2, so it may be that a more realistic model of language might help to solve some of these problems.

From the point of view of what they tell us about language, however, creoles are of less immediate interest, since they are just ordinary languages like any others, except in their origins. There are just two qualifications to be made to this claim, both of which are matters of language change: creoles, unlike ordinary language, arise through a process called (naturally enough) creolisation, and they are likely to gradually lose their identity by decreolisation (Aitchison 1994: 3184–6). It is only in between these two stages that they are ordinary languages.

Taking DECREOLISATION first, this is what happens when a creole is spoken in a country where other people speak the creole's lexical source-language (for example, English). Since the latter has so much more prestige than the creole, creole speakers tend to shift towards it, producing a range of intermediate varieties. Sociolinguists call the creole the BASILECT and the prestige language the ACROLECT, with the intermediate varieties lumped together as MESOLECTS. This range of varieties spanning the gap between basilect and acrolect is called a 'POST-CREOLE CONTINUUM'.

This term reflects an interesting factual claim about the relationships among the mesolects. Like the acrolect and basilect, each mesolect is a vast collection of items which could (in principle at least) constitute the entire language of a group of speakers. The basilect is likely to be as different from the acrolect as Tok Pisin is from English, so it is easy to see that thousands of items must vary and that, linguistically speaking, most of them are quite independent of one another: the way in which future time is expressed has nothing to do with the form of the pronoun *I* or *me*, and so on through the grammar and vocabulary. Each mesolect represents one combination of basilect and acrolect items, so it is easy to imagine a rather chaotic scene in which different mesolects combine items in completely different ways. The claim that lies behind the term 'continuum', however, is that the relations are actually much more orderly, and there is at least a strong tendency for mesolects to line up along a single scale from most basilectal to most acrolectal.

For example, here is a series of alternative ways of saying 'I came and carried it away' that are allowed by the post-creole continuum of Nigeria (Todd 1994: 3181):

(1) A bin kam, kariam go.
(2) A kom, kariam go.
(3) A kom, kariam awe.
(4) A kem and kari it awe.

If these examples are typical, then there are at least four degrees of 'height' from the lowest basilect (1) to the highest mesolect (4). Each of the linguistic items concerned can be given an index to show the range of heights that it covers:

bin kam	(1)	kariam	(1–3)	go	(1–2)
kom	(2–3)	kari it	(4)	awe	(3–4)
kem	(4)				

Each mesolect represents a consistent selection on this scale, in which all the items are allowed to have the same relative height. If this is so, then no mesolect allows *bin kam* (1) and also *awe* (3–4), nor is there one which combines either *bin kam* or *kom* as well as *kari it*.

Post-creole continuums have been reported from several countries, perhaps the best documented being the one in Guyana (Bickerton 1975). They are clearly of great interest socially, if we can take them as evidence for a general tendency for such communities to create single-scale social ranking systems, although a more chaotic pattern is so easy to imagine. However, what makes post-creole continuums particularly interesting for a sociolinguist is the clear evidence they give for the independent social classification of single linguistic items. The

scale of 'height' in the last paragraph applies to individual items, with each item assigned a particular range on the scale. Notions like 'dialect' are of no help at all in this kind of situation, and what is actually needed is a way of giving detailed social information about individual items. This conclusion should come as no surprise after the discussion above about the centrality of individual linguistic items.

We turn now to the other peculiarity of creoles, the process of CREOLISATION. As we noted at the beginning of this section, a creole is a pidgin that has native speakers. As it stands, this is simply a fact about how we use the words *pidgin* and *creole*, and it is a matter of fact whether having native speakers entails any other differences between creoles and their pidgin sources. Tok Pisin has just recently gone through this process of 'acquiring native speakers' (a nice reversal of the usual process whereby native speakers acquire a language!). Imagine a couple in New Guinea who speak Tok Pisin to each other for lack of any other common language, but who each have some other language as their native language. They have a baby, who starts to speak Tok Pisin. (As we saw in the north-west Amazon, it is possible for a child's first language to be a language which is not the mother's native language.) The essential difference between the baby and the parents is that the baby is learning Tok Pisin as its first language, whereas when they learned it they already knew another language. The question is whether this difference necessarily affects the outcome of the learning process. In other words, will the Tok Pisin which the child eventually speaks as an adult be different in essential ways from the Tok Pisin spoken by its parents?

The answer to this question is the subject of an intense debate not only among creole specialists but also among non-social linguists. On the one hand, are the linguists who, following Noam Chomsky (1986), believe that every child is genetically prepared ('programmed') to learn a human language like English or Japanese; in other words, that our ability to learn language is innate. When children are born into a family where the only language they hear is a mere pidgin, their genes push them to up-grade it to a full language by enriching it with relative clauses and other complexities not needed in a mere pidgin. The main proponent of this view is Derek Bickerton (1981, 1988), who calls the genetic predisposition to learn a full language the 'bioprogram'. On the other side of the debate are the majority of sociolinguists and creolists, who are less impressed by Chomsky's arguments for an innate language faculty. They question Bickerton's factual claims about differences between creoles and pidgins, and also his claims about similarities between creolisation and the processes of ordinary first-language acquisition (Aitchison 1994: 3185). In any case the kinds of feature which Bickerton assumes to be innate seem very different from

those which Chomsky has argued for, so the two views conflict rather than support one another. (For a helpful review of this debate, see Romaine 1988.)

A somewhat different view is that pidgins can become richer to the extent of being similar to ordinary languages without the intervention of infant language-learners. On this view, the only difference between a creole and an enriched pidgin is that the former has native speakers and the latter does not. We have seen that some pidgins are already sufficiently developed to be used as standard languages, as in the case of Tok Pisin. One particularly interesting piece of research has been done on Tok Pisin in this connection, by Gillian Sankoff and Penelope Brown (1976), who studied the recent history of relative clauses in Tok Pisin and showed how a consistent marker of relative clauses was gradually developed out of the word *ia* (based ultimately on the English *here*), which is now put both before and after many relative clauses.

> Na pik *ia* ol ikilim bipo *ia* bai ikamap olsem draipela ston.
> (Now pig here past kill people here future become huge stone)
> 'And this pig which they had killed before would turn into a huge stone.'
> (Sankoff and Brown 1976: 632)

This construction may illustrate the influence of the syntax of the local languages on that of the pidgin, since Buang, for instance, has a word which is used both as a demonstrative and as a marker of relative clauses in the same way as *ia*. What is particularly interesting about this research is that speakers of a pidgin continue to develop it, using whatever resources are available, in a process that does not depend on creolisation. Indeed, Sankoff and Brown have evidence that it had started at least ten years before there were any significant numbers of native speakers of Tok Pisin. Again, there is no research evidence of changes that have happened during creolisation which cannot be matched by changes to a pidgin without native speakers.

The conclusion to which this discussion seems to lead is that there is no clear difference between pidgins and creoles, apart from the fact that creoles have native speakers and pidgins do not. No other differences between pidgins and creoles seem necessarily to follow from this one. Since we have also claimed that creoles are just ordinary languages (with some reservations about creole continua) and that pidgins are rather peculiar, it follows that the distinction between the 'normal' and the 'peculiar' (as represented by early stages of pidginisation) is unclear, and is in fact a continuum rather than a qualitative difference. Moreover, it is clear that there is no moment in time at which a particular pidgin suddenly comes into existence, but rather a process of variety-creation called pidginisation, by which a pidgin is gradually built up out of nothing. We might well ask whether this process is essentially different from what happens

in everyday interaction between people who think they speak the same language, but who are in fact constantly accommodating their speech and language to each other's needs. (Compare the suggestion by Robert Le Page (1977b) that 'every speech act is . . . the reflex of an "instant pidgin" related to the linguistic competence of more than one person'.) For instance a parallel may be drawn between the New Guinea natives learning an approximation to English vocabulary from each other and the local English speakers, on the one hand, and students of linguistics learning an approximation to the vocabulary of their teachers from each other and from their teachers, on the other. In both cases it is clear who has to do the bulk of the learning, though the dominant group may sometimes use the forms which they know the subordinate group use, in order to make things easier for them. In both cases what develops is a variety of language which is passed on from one person to another, developed out of countless encounters between teachers and students and between students themselves. The reader of this book may be amused at the idea of being a speaker of 'pidgin linguistics', but the suggestion is intended to be taken quite seriously.

2.6 Conclusions

This chapter has ranged over several types of language variety, including 'languages', 'dialects' (both regional and social), 'registers', 'standard languages', 'High' and 'Low' varieties in diglossia, 'pidgins' and 'creoles'. We have come to essentially negative conclusions about varieties. Firstly, there are considerable problems in delimiting one variety from another of the same type (for example, one language from another, or one dialect from another). Secondly, there are serious problems in delimiting one *type* of variety from another – languages from dialects, or dialects from registers, or 'ordinary languages' from creoles, or creoles from pidgins. (We could have shown similar uncertainties on the border between 'standard' and 'non-standard' varieties.) Thirdly, we have suggested that the only satisfactory way to solve these problems is to avoid the notion 'variety' altogether as an analytical or theoretical concept, and to focus instead on the individual linguistic item. For each item some kind of 'social description' is needed, saying roughly who uses it and when: in some cases an item's social description will be unique, whereas in others it may be possible to generalise across a more or less large number of items. The nearest this approach comes to the concept of 'variety' is in these sets of items with similar social descriptions, but their characteristics are rather different from those of varieties like languages and dialects. On the other hand, it is still possible to use terms like 'variety' and 'language' in an

informal way, as they have been used in the last few sections, without intending them to be taken seriously as theoretical constructs.

We also came to rather similar conclusions regarding the concept 'speech community', which seems to exist only to the extent that people have identified it and can locate themselves in relation to it. Since different individuals will identify different communities in this way, we have to give up any attempt to find objective and absolute criteria for defining speech communities. This leaves us, on the one hand, with individuals speakers and their range of linguistic items and, on the other, with communities defined primarily without reference to language.

Having reduced the subject-matter of sociolinguistics to the study of individual linguistic items of particular speakers, we may ask what kinds of generalisation it is possible to make. We have seen that there are many general questions to which it would be interesting to have answers, such as whether different kinds of linguistic items are related to different aspects of society. I have suggested some answers to this question, and to others raised in this chapter, but at this stage they can be little more than speculative. However, it should now be clear that such questions are worth asking, and that future research will provide answers supported by empirical evidence.