

CHAPTER 2

SOCIOLINGUISTICS: LANGUAGE AND CULTURES

This chapter includes:

- language variety, accents and dialects
- issues around power, gender and Standard English
- language change
- multilingualism and inclusive educational policies.

Sociolinguists study the language worlds of communities, homes, factories and schools, and their work reveals the chameleon-like characteristics of human languages. Remarkable variety and continuous change are the norms, not just among different languages but within language communities. Sociolinguists have always added to the more abstract descriptions of the 'pure' linguists with their own richly diverse accounts of the relationships between languages and cultures. This chapter outlines the ways in which language variety and change are usually described and includes some consideration of the social and personal value systems involved. Any account of the human contexts in which language occurs must try to reflect as vividly as possible the complex interweaving of values, prestige, power and individual identity.

Language variety

The topic of language variety can be discussed in two ways:

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- the practices of distinct language communities
- personal and idiosyncratic usage.

The latter emphasizes the highly individual nature of language use, including the effects of different styles and linguistic choices. The former reveals the huge number of human languages that exist as well as the immense variations of accent and dialect found in any one apparently uniform language community.

Variety within a language community: accents and dialects

Accents

Accent refers simply to pronunciation: the sound of the language as it is shaped and articulated by a speaker. Discussions about English phonology tend to focus on such differences as the sounded length of the vowel 'a' in 'bath', 'path' and 'class'. This well-known variant is associated with a north-south geographical divide, the short 'a' sound (as in 'cat') being commonly used from the Midlands northwards and the long 'a' (as in 'car') being a typically southern form.

However, geography is not the only explanation for accent variation in Britain: social class and notions of educated speech complicate the picture. Our voices are the immediate and most obvious indicators of our origins because in infancy we begin by speaking and sounding like those around us. However, regional accents are subjected to the most extraordinary non-linguistic judgements: basically, our personal likes and dislikes.

We are all aware of, or have even been the victims of, the many self-styled guardians of linguistic standards who express strong disapproval of such characteristics as the dropping of sounds at the ends of words in casual rapid speech. Similarly, the glottal-stop feature found in London dialects that replaces the sound 't' in such words as 'butter' and 'bottle' with a throaty 'uh' sound, is regularly condemned.

A more objective appraisal of these kinds of issues reveals some interesting facts. For example, the pedantic sounding of all terminal sounds would make many English utterances slow and stilted. Indeed, many other languages feature regularly unsounded terminal letters. The juxtaposition of words in English utterances affects phonetic patterns and ease of articulation, frequently resulting in the dropping of terminal sounds. Try listening for the final 't' sound in 'last' when it is part of an everyday expression such as 'that's the last straw!' The relative pleasantness, ease, or even physical possibility involved in the production of the sounds of a language, are significant factors in the spoken form.

However, ease is only one among many elements: some apparently very difficult sounds, such as clicks, glottal stops and the English 'tb', are standard features of particular languages and dialects and 'natural' to their speakers. The



glottal stop is much maligned by some speakers of British English, yet it is a distinctive standard feature of the German language. As for the dropping of the initial breathy (aspirated) 'h' in English, it can be a sign of aristocratic birth as well as of working-class origins.

All these strange contradictions indicate that careless pronunciation or even phonological limitations are *not* the major issues in discussing accents. Social judgements and cultural myths are usually being aired. We hear the voices of the people we meet – children and adults – through a filter of cultural beliefs, personal experiences and social values. It is not surprising then, that in the course of their lives, many individuals effect a blurring or weakening of their localized accents until they approximate to a more standard and prestigious variety. These changes are influenced and facilitated by such life experiences as extended education, membership of the professions, social-class mobility and personal ambition.

The most prestigious accent in the UK has been Received Pronunciation (RP), and it is also associated with the most influential dialect, Standard English (SE). These two special cases of variety will be discussed in the context of power and influence in language issues, as well as in the following discussion of dialect. Before moving on to consider dialect, it is important to re-emphasize the emotionally charged and value-laden nature of our responses to the sounds of voices. All kinds of feelings and prejudices may be aroused simply by the sounds of vowels and consonants. The accents of our childhood can evoke powerful memories of warmth or community, but their reception by others at a later stage may have caused us either to exaggerate or to modify them. We may even have rejected them completely.

Dialects

Dialects are usually associated with specific geographical regions and, therefore, involve the use of regional accents. The concept of dialect regions is complex and variable (see Trudgill, 1994). We may find that sociolinguists are referring to areas as vast as the USA, or as specific as the city of Norwich or the Harlem district of New York. However, the notion of dialect is clear and is not restricted to the sounds of a phonological system. A dialect is a true variety of a language and it includes distinctive vocabulary and syntax systems.

We are usually first aware of a dialect because of the lexical choices speakers, and sometimes writers, make, for example, 'bairn' and 'greetin', 'mither' and 'flit', 'faucet' and 'pocketbook'. The regular use of the previous examples would identify speakers of Scottish English, Lancashire dialect and American English, respectively. The differences in syntax, such as the order of words in utterances and sentences and different ways of marking plurals, tenses and agreements are not always so obvious. However, some very distinctive forms of syntax are widely recognized: 'I kinda gotten used to' from the USA or the British variants, 'I dinna ken' and 'Tha's a reet proper good un'.

Dialects are regular, rule-governed systems of language and, just as it is

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impossible to speak at all without an accent, so it is impossible to speak without using a dialect. We are all dialect speakers and we all have accents. Judgements, preferences and views about these dialects and accents are social and cultural features of language in use, but not purely linguistic facts.

Received Pronunciation (RP) and Standard English (SE)

The issues become even more complicated when we take account of the influence on British English of two high-status language variants. In the matter of accent there is Received Pronunciation (RP). Outside linguistic circles it has been known variously as Queen's English, a public-school accent and even BBC English. Most of my own young pupils in south London neatly summarized it as 'talking posh'. The RP accent no longer reflects any geographical origins but it still has considerable social and political power and, in combination with Standard English (SE), it is an indicator of social class.

The really posh or affected form of RP appears to have lost favour in recent years and been abandoned by the BBC. It can only be heard among the older generation of royalty, certain politicians, senior military officers and public-school 'types'. Contemporary RP is still an establishment accent, suggesting a decent education while retaining some slight traces of regional affiliations. The accents of those who have experienced lengthy post-secondary-level education, entered the professions or the higher managerial levels of business and industry tend to be modified in the direction of RP by neutralizing any strongly localized sounds.

Received Pronunciation is the accent usually associated with the prestigious dialect of SE, but it is very important to understand that this dialect may be spoken with a range of accents. This fact is demonstrated by radio and television broadcasting: programmes of news, current affairs and the arts are now presented by speakers using SE dialect in a wide variety of regional accents. Apparently, many presenters are able to enhance their own personal popularity, as well as the programme ratings, because of their appealing accents, be they east London, southern Irish or Cumbrian. The appeal or otherwise of accents is an issue that will be returned to in the next section, but the dialect of SE dominates broadcast media, the printed forms of the language and education. It is also the dialect taught to foreigners and to British children and their families who have other first languages. These important uses of SE indicate that the prestige of the variety springs from its significant social and cultural functions rather than from any inherent linguistic superiority.

It is not difficult to see that in a complex democratic society, command of one fairly standard form of the language is important for unambiguous national communications, access to information and education and full individual independence and participation in the community. This does not mean that SE is the best dialect for all of us, for all purposes and all personal needs, although for some groups and individuals it may well be their first dialect.



Learning and teaching suggestions

- Organize visits to distinctive language community areas (shops, markets, old people's homes, clubs and places of worship). These experiences can be recorded electronically, or in photographs, or in class and group books/folders/posters.
- Invite speakers of different languages and dialects to visit the setting and share something of their language and culture (this must be handled sensitively but potential language visitors may be found among the parents and families of the children and the practitioners in the setting).

Variety in individual language use: idiolects and registers

Idiolects

If variety is the norm at the level of world languages and the diverse forms within them, it is also the case at the level of individual language use. Just as there is a multitude of world languages, so there are as many different ways of using language personally as there are individuals in a language community. This may seem a wild claim but we each have a unique way or ways with our language or languages. This individual linguistic style is called 'idiolect' and is made up of the very slight differences in phonology, syntax and vocabulary that are normal in individuals and give us our instant linguistic identity among family, friends and acquaintances. Within our own idiolect range we all switch language styles and this again includes changes in phonology, vocabulary and syntax. Many people use at least two distinct dialects and many are operating two or more distinctive languages. This bilingual feature will be looked at separately but the regular use of more than one dialect has already been implied in the comments on SE dialect. Children and adults whose home or regional dialect differs from SE still hear it on the media, and read it and see it in books, newspapers and other written materials. Children also see, hear and read SE in group settings and schools, and become expert at negotiating the dialect switches involved in moving between nurseries, playgroups, classrooms, playgrounds, streets and homes.

Registers

There are no single-style speakers in any dialect and we all have a wide repertoire of sociolinguistic responses. These ideas are usually described in terms of 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972), which is one of the central concepts in modern sociolinguistics. The theory states that grammatical competence alone is not an adequate way of explaining the linguistically appropriate ways in which we respond to a total social and cultural situation. We change our ways of speaking according to the who, where, when and how of the situation.

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This kind of communicative competence is specific to cultures and societies and their differing value systems, but the end result is that competent communicators anywhere employ a wide range of linguistic styles. These styles, which are tied to certain situations and activities, are usually called 'registers' and can range from the very formal to the very casual. Registers are usually indicators of interpersonal relationships, status and power. Thus we find that there are different but appropriate registers operating in talk between, for example, teachers and pupils, doctors and patients, customers and shop assistants. Social settings call for varied registers, and people switch styles as they move between homes, schools, shops, factories, offices and so on.

Learning and teaching suggestion

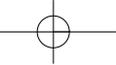
- Set up telephones in your various role-play areas, as well as providing pretend mobile phones for the outside and inside environments. Attempt to record some of the children's conversations (video/audio). How do young children 'create' their non-existent language partner? What kinds of topics and issues occur in these 'conversations'? Add your observations to the children's individual records of progress in speaking and listening (see Gillen and Hall, 2001).

Among our repertoires of registers all of us will be able to call on some elements of that extremely informal style known as slang. On the whole, slang tends to rely on a special range of vocabulary, for example, 'cool' and 'laid back' from the world of jazz. Slang is usually closely tied to a place and a lifestyle, and has often been associated with racy street language.

Slang is ephemeral and easily dates overenthusiastic users who fail to move with the times. We probably cringe now at an exclamation like 'gosh' but some slang does enter the fairly permanent stock of the language. Perhaps this status has been achieved by such terms as 'cool', 'super', 'OK', 'sleaze' and 'wally'. Slang is not a modern deviation from some golden age of language – it has always been used and recorded by historians, diarists, novelists and amateur and professional linguists. Furthermore, it is ordinary evidence of the vitality and creativity of language in daily use. Just as we delight in the linguistic inventiveness of very young children, we can savour in slang the language play of adults, particularly young adults. Slang is often richest and most diverse in youth subcultures.

There is a darker side to slang: it has always been used to mask activities involving crime and violence. When slang is a secret criminal language it is called '*argot*', and many claim that one of the most famous slang dialects, Cockney, began as an argot used by London's criminal underworld. The traditional use of Cockney rhyming slang requires reference to just the non-rhyming half of the word pair. Thus, only those in the know would understand the intended meaning of 'Wash your boat and put your titfer on. We'll 'ave a butchers at me old China'. Cockney is now more accurately described as a social-class dialect rather than an argot or a slang.

One other language register frequently confused with slang is jargon. Again,



most of us have some jargon in our repertoires and we use it appropriately. There are hints of criticism and disapproval in most references to jargon but it can be a useful linguistic tool. Jargon tends to come into a language as new technologies, occupations and pastimes enter and permeate the society. Like slang, jargon is a source of enrichment and creative usage, and we would all be linguistically diminished by the loss of some contributions from space exploration, information and communication technology, science, medicine and the media, to name but a few sources.

The jargon of occupations and professions also fulfils a very positive role. 'Talking shop' enables us to communicate efficiently and accurately with our colleagues and can be absolutely vital in the context of hospital operating theatres, airport control towers and the factory floor. It is just as important, if a little less dramatic, in educational settings when we talk of 'fours in Reception', 'special educational needs children', 'concrete experiences' or 'emergent writing'. There is, however, a negative side to jargon and this probably gives it a bad name. When jargon is persistently used outside the appropriate setting in which it makes good sense, it functions as a barrier to exclude outsiders. 'Talking shop' then becomes a way of intentionally limiting communication to a chosen few. Although it certainly enhances their sense of group solidarity, it tends to infuriate outsiders.

Summary

- Language variety is reflected in the different languages of the world but it is also a feature within apparently uniform language communities.
- Two major aspects of variety within a language are accent and dialect. Accent refers solely to differences in pronunciation – the sounds of a spoken language. Dialect is a variety of a language with distinctive variations in syntax and vocabulary, as well as pronunciation.
- Standard English is the high-status dialect of English that is used in the written form of the language. It is also used widely in business and professional circles, the media, education and the teaching of English as a foreign language. Standard English dialect may be spoken with any accent.
- Received Pronunciation is a prestigious non-regional accent associated with higher education and, traditionally, the private school system in the UK and Oxford and Cambridge universities (Oxbridge).
- Variety is also found in every individual's linguistic repertoire because we all switch registers, changing the degrees of formality in our language, according to the social context. Individuals use a variety of other forms, including other dialects, slang and jargon. We all develop a unique idiolect that makes our voices and language styles instantly recognizable.

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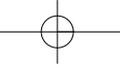
Power and influence

The old advertising slogan, 'how to win friends and influence people', is still a useful tool in the hands of those who take advantage of the networks of power and influence that permeate language use in Britain. Think of the so-called language teachers who still advertise their services in the pages of daily newspapers, for example, 'Why Are You Shamed By Your Mistakes In English?' The private speech teachers and the steady output of magazine articles, books and DVDs that claim to be able to increase our word power, our influence over others and our business and social success, are evidence of the power of social judgements about language.

With respect to children and education, it is clear that one of the 'good things' families buy when they pay for their children's education in private schools is fluency in 'good English'. Evaluative judgements of this kind about English have little place in purely linguistic descriptions of the many varieties of English. However, British people do understand and use such phrases as 'good English' or 'talking properly', and they know that these expressions refer to SE spoken with an RP accent, although not necessarily a posh or affected form. The decent education suggested by the consistent use of RP and spoken SE is often synonymous with private schooling or a state schooling topped off with an Oxbridge degree. These comments may sound like unfounded generalizations, but there is something to be said for accepting the existence of linguistic prejudices, noting their power, and evolving clear and principled responses to their influence.

Although the prescriptive tradition in linguistics has been weakened (if not fully replaced) by a more scientific descriptive approach (see Chapter 1), its influence in the social and cultural spheres has not diminished. Yet it is in the daily use of spoken and written language throughout society and in many influential institutions that people's life chances may be deeply affected. It is the case that people may still fail to obtain jobs, accommodation or even places in higher education because the sounds of their accents and the dialects they use trigger in others immediate reactions that equate some voices with stupidity, dishonesty, lawlessness, poverty and the general condemnation expressed as 'common'. The fact that these judgements are direct reflections of power and status, and not inherent in accents and dialects as such, is obvious because they only occur when the weaker partner, the applicant, speaks a low-status language variety. However, if you have become a successful employer, property owner or college principal you can be as broadly Cockney or Glaswegian as you choose, within the limits of intelligibility. This now happens in the broadcast media where the whole irrationality of it becomes obvious. A very popular and highly paid chat-show host, business entrepreneur or television chef can use a low-status, south or east London accent and dialect, but a female news-reader with a Scottish accent speaking SE is subjected to abusive and complaining letters!

Most people cope with these situations by becoming bi-dialectal in their professional and personal lives and making the necessary switches according



to the current state of the particular power game in which they find themselves. This means that if we are not native speakers of SE dialect, we may choose to add it to our spoken repertoire and use it in those situations where our home dialect may put us at some social, political or cultural disadvantage. In practice this is what many of us do, but some sociolinguists would deplore this on ideological grounds and urge us to set about changing the attitudes of society. In the long term this may well be the aim of all informed and concerned linguists, academics, lawyers, politicians, employers and so forth. But early years practitioners have a professional commitment to the young children who are in schools and group settings now. We not only plan for the futures of all our children, we must also have a response and a policy for next Monday morning. It is for this reason that the role of the SE dialect in care and education must be clarified.

Standard English

As long ago as 1988 the National Curriculum English Working Group set out some perceptive general principles for educational policies on Standard English (DES, 1988: 13–16), emphasizing the sensitive nature of the issues. These are still worth consideration in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

- Access to SE: children have an undoubted entitlement to learn to use the standard form. This argument rests on the role of the standard variety as the common and shared communicative and cultural basis of British society, particularly in its public, commercial, industrial, professional and educational spheres. The role of SE extends beyond the UK and its competent users have automatic access to a world language.
- Standard English must be learnt and taught in ways that do not denigrate the non-standard dialects spoken by many children and adults. Educators need to be aware of the powerful symbolic and emotional charge non-standard dialects carry. They also need to recognize the damaging impact on children, their families and their communities of a too premature or forceful imposition of SE in group settings and schools. Early childhood educators need to be particularly sensitive to the confusion, distress and lack of progress an excessive zeal for standard forms in talking and writing may produce. Much older children can choose if, when, and how they will use SE in their lives, because they are able to judge its limitations and its power and set it alongside their home dialects as yet another option. Very young children are emotionally and socially vulnerable, and experience language forms as intimately bound up with the people who use them. At its most positive, this is revealed when they are playing and dramatizing roles and they slip easily into talking as a posh or pompous person, or even imitate the ways in which their carers and teachers tell stories or deliver reprimands. An amazing command of SE is frequently demonstrated on these occasions!
- Teaching SE in schools is most fruitfully and positively focused on the

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teaching of the written form. Standard English is the language of non-regional public communication, and children need to be able to communicate and have control over their lives beyond the limits of family and local culture. This aspect of political and democratic power may be years away from small children in playgroups, children's centres, nurseries and primary schools, but the foundations of literacy are laid in the early years. We all learn a new form of the language when we begin to read and write, and this gives a sensible, shared focus for literacy in the early years. The written SE dialect can be taught well without undermining children's pride and involvement in the personal and cultural worlds of family, faith and race. Indeed, families and local communities look to schools to advance their children's literacy; they also teach them many things about reading and writing themselves and they take a pride in their children's early mastery of literacy.

If insisting on the use of spoken SE at all times can be a dangerous game, how much more so is rash interference with accents. Regional and class accents are intimately bound up with early infancy, personal identity and community. Furthermore, the complexities of phonology are such that any artificially imposed changes may be totally negative in their effects. We choose to vary our accents, we choose to sound like the people we admire or wish to be associated with and, conversely, we can use our accents as clear markers of resistance or dissent. It has already been noted that accents are often the focus for extraordinary and instant sets of prejudices, assumptions and aesthetic judgements. Nowhere is this more so than when the accent indicates foreign origins or non-British varieties of English. The totally unpleasant nature of these discriminations can be appreciated if we contrast the generally positive status accorded to some European accents, for example, French or Spanish, with responses to Asian or Chinese accents. Racism and prejudice are often linked with ignorance, fear and competition for limited resources such as wealth, good housing and education. In the USA, a Spanish accent is frequently linked with deprivation of all these good things and provokes some very negative responses. This is in marked contrast to positive British feelings about Spanish accents: they can evoke the passionate Latin temperament, images of cities like Seville and Granada, as well as the glorious Iberian climate! The implications are clear: people's initial responses to each other are strongly influenced by the feelings, assumptions, experiences and ideas they and their cultural group attach to certain dialects and accents.

Learning and teaching suggestions

- Create a group/class/setting dialect inventory by listing all the dialects known and used by the children and adults. Try to discover where they come from and also start to investigate the nature of accents (draw on the children's television viewing for a wider range of dialect and accent experiences).
- Choose a range of stories, poems, rhymes and songs which use a range of dialects and accents (including both the familiar and some new to the



children). Listen to nursery rhymes, poetry and stories spoken in a variety of dialects and accents (on CDs and DVDs).

Language and gender

The complicated issues of discrimination and bias have also been linked with language and gender studies in recent years. It has long been known that in many cultures there are differences in the language forms used by women and men. In English language cultures and in the West generally, these differences are stylistic tendencies rather than clear language varieties. The impression has been that women spoke 'nicely' in their social contacts, even if they were not speakers of high-status varieties by regional or social-class origin. In the recent past this impression was further reinforced by the general absence of swear words and taboo references in women's habitual talk.

Some observations of women's talk also noted a greater use of tentative and deferential forms: 'If you don't mind ...?' 'Would you like to ...?' 'Is it alright if ...?' But these tendencies are fairly general and they can be true of the weak, the insecure and the dominated of either sex. The language forms mainly associated with women can be seen as the appropriate deferential responses of any powerless group. Until recently it appeared that women regularly used these subservient forms rather than resisting by exaggerating their non-standard and low-status varieties, or choosing positive and even aggressive language. The reasons for this are not linguistic but reflect social training and habitual roles. Women appear to be very status conscious: they tend to 'set a good example' to the children they are raising. Furthermore, their own earlier socialization may have emphasized that low-status, aggressive or rude language is masculine and tough. However, this state of linguistic affairs has changed dramatically and the tendencies mentioned here are disappearing rapidly, particularly among women who are employed and the younger generations of women and girls. This points to the really important factor: language primarily reflects and also emerges out of social practices and situations, not gender differences.

Gender issues are also very obvious in the linguistic area of word choices in texts and the conventional and unthinking use of the written language system. These issues have particular significance in education and the teaching of literacy, and should be the focus of a continuous, sensible and sensitive consciousness-raising approach. This applies to apparently unintentional bias as well as to specifically sexist usage. The matters to be addressed have received considerable attention in recent years but should still be in the forefront of the concerns of thoughtful language users, professional carers and educators. Careless and frequent references to 'mankind' or 'the history of man' may not be as sex-neutral as is traditionally claimed, particularly for young and unsophisticated early readers, viewers and listeners. Also, do we need to be made a little uncomfortable about always automatically writing 'men and women' rather than 'women and men'? Some real

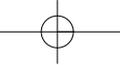
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changes in awareness are beginning to affect the use of such terms as chairman, postman and paper boy, but spoken and written references to barristers, consultants and professors often assume the appropriateness of the male pronoun, without first verifying the gender of the individual.

The use of the allegedly neutral male personal pronoun in the written forms has now been questioned so much that authors have to provide a gender disclaimer. But is this good enough? Sensitive usage adopts the plural 'they' whenever possible, or carefully specifies her or him, she or he. The books used in early years settings and schools carry considerable status and approval, so great care needs to be exercised over the messages texts and images carry about all forms of discrimination. With respect to gender, educators are now very much aware of the attitudes conveyed by narratives, photographs and illustrations. There has been a long tradition of reading primers that featured boys helping fathers service the car while girls helped mothers to wash dishes and make beds. Such obvious stereotypes are easily identified in reading books, but other textbooks and teaching materials that use drawings, photographs and apparatus need to be examined carefully. We must always ask, 'Where are the women and girls? What are they doing and saying?' and, 'Are the boys engaged in literacy activities?' Admittedly, the use of computers in early years settings and schools has drawn more boys into literacy activities (Figure 2.1) but this may sometimes reduce the contact girls have with information and communication technology (ICT).



Figure 2.1 Josh (4 years 6 months) and his friends at the computer



Schools, early years settings and individual practitioners also have to deal with attitudes that mainly associate art, literacy, books and sensitive or caring responses with girls and women, while such areas as mathematics, science, technology, physical courage and boisterousness are the prerogative of men and boys. These attitudes or prejudices are often deeply rooted in certain social classes and ethnic groups, and will only be modified by a long process of reasoned challenges, caring attitudes and continuous talk between schools, families and their communities. Policies and provision in early years settings should continue to raise gender awareness and challenge practices and stereotypes that devalue girls and restrict the literacy achievements of boys. Gender bias, like many other prejudices, is not primarily a language problem: language reflects and perpetuates existing social attitudes.

Summary

- The topic of language variety is bound up with sociocultural values and judgements about people as much as about identifiable linguistic features. Language variety reflects individual and group identity and loyalties, because it originates in geographical regions and close-knit communities.
- The SE dialect and the RP accent are high status because of their links with education, wealth and power in British society.
- Children have an entitlement to learn to use SE, particularly in the formal written mode, because it gives them access to national and international culture, education, democratic autonomy and employment.
- The teaching of SE in schools must respect children's home dialects and be sensitive to the social and developmental needs of young children.
- Language and gender studies highlight the links between power and language use in a community. It is obvious that submissive female language is not genetically ordained – it was the language of the insecure and dominated.
- In educational contexts great care must be given to avoiding written and spoken language forms that appear to marginalize or ignore girls and women and limit the literacy activities and aspirations of boys.

Language change

Human languages are in a constant state of change. Most of us are fairly sensitive to the changes that have occurred in our own first language lifetimes: we

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are aware of subtle differences in the language of old films and we may even sense that our grandparents' generation talk and use written language differently. In the case of English literature, we see and hear remarkable changes in Chaucer's, Shakespeare's and Pinter's language. Historical linguistics has always studied languages as they change over generations and centuries, but this perspective has now shifted to an interest in studying the subtle, ongoing processes of change in progress in contemporary language communities.

Change in language is mainly associated with the vocabulary and pronunciation of the spoken form because these features are so easily noticed; however, change affects other aspects of a language, such as semantics and syntax. Some linguists would claim that individual language-learning experiences and histories are a part of language change and modification. The misunderstandings and mishearings of infants in a language community are a source of variations that are sometimes retained in families and groups. Most of the non-standard sound patterns (past tenses and plurals or misunderstood word meanings) are gradually corrected but, in certain social situations, mature fluent speakers may switch to a lisped pronunciation, a 'foreign' accent, a babyish word or an ungrammatical plural or word order. Families frequently preserve and continue to use some expressive features of their children's first language experiments, for example, 'mapple' (apple), 'chimps' (shrimps) and 'annadent' (accident). But these are very minor features of change and more closely related to human linguistic playfulness and social sensitivity than the kinds of changes that affect a whole language community.

Major sources of language change

New technologies

The arrival of new inventions and the influences of new forms of mass communication lead to a sudden increase in the numbers of new words in a language. The effect in terms of vocabulary is particularly noticeable with respect to nouns and verbs. But words are not mere labels and the new terminologies provide ways of thinking about and using the new concepts involved in areas as diverse as ICT, psychoanalysis, space technology, medicine, television, environmental issues and so on. These words and concepts provide metaphors that pervade our language and our thinking (Figure 2.2).

It is interesting to note the everyday occurrence of terms that already distance us from our parents' and grandparents' generations, for example: 'psychosomatic', 'countdown', 'lift off', 'mobile', 'texting', 'click', 'mouse', 'download', 'the remote', 'software', 'cloning', 'green', 'credit crunch', 'global warming'. Perhaps the early twenty-first century will come to be 'dated' by all the language associated with emails, mobile/cell phones, iPods, interactive whiteboards and text-messaging systems. This is a reminder that languages are living and changing (Aitchison, 2001; Crystal, 2008): they are not as rigid, sacred or eternally true and perfect as is sometimes suggested by some commentators, policy-makers and textbooks.

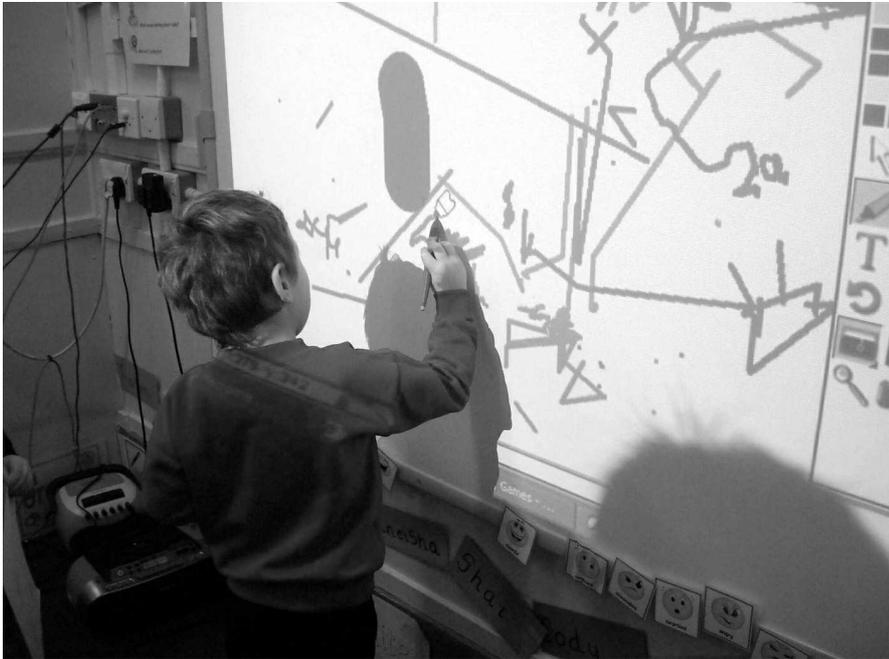


Figure 2.2 Mark-making with new technologies (4 years)

Group loyalties

The idea that languages are responsive to and shaped by the needs of their speakers brings us to a consideration of group identity as a source of language change. Within a single language community (although the concept of 'single' will have to be greatly modified in the next section), the various social, economic and regional groups or classes use varieties of the main language. These varieties are the dialects discussed earlier, and their distinctive grammatical forms and vocabularies are the means by which their speakers assert and maintain their group loyalties and identities. Group dialects also include such specialized registers as argots and slang and some of their variations in syntax and lexis also enter the general usage of the larger language community. Clearly, it does not do to become too solemn about careless slang ruining the language: after all, 'pram', 'buggy' and 'car' are today's standard words but they were slang only a few generations ago.

Group solidarity also provides us with good evidence for the changes in phonology that occur in a language. The subtle changes and value judgements associated with accents are very interesting in that they reveal two different and opposed tendencies. Accent change in a language community can be said, in a social-class sense, to pull two ways. First, there is the more generally known tendency for speakers with a low-status accent to shift closer to standard or high-status features of pronunciation when putting on a 'telephone voice', or talking to speakers with a 'superior' accent. This suggests that it is a rather

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conscious decision and such examples may reflect a bid for prestige in certain social contexts, or even a general admiration and envy of the lifestyle and affluence of those who habitually use high-status pronunciation patterns.

However, there are instances when the process is reversed and the change is from the high-prestige to the low-prestige accent. The paradox here is that, for certain social and cultural reasons, a low-status accent can become so admired and indicative of success that people want to imitate it. In the 1960s the influence of the Beatles elevated the Scouse dialect and accent to a status they have never quite lost. More recently, highly educated middle-class youngsters were integrating Cockney-style expressions into their speech, saying such things as 'get it sorted' and 'I was gutted'. Young people have also been using terms derived from Black British English, such as 'man', 'sister', 'brother' and, for absolute approval, 'it's da bomb!' The point of the paradox is that high and low status, as used to refer to accents and dialects, are sociocultural value judgements and subject to change and fashion, as are all tastes and values.

Historical and political developments

Generally, language changes caused by large-scale historical and political developments are greater and more dramatic than vowel shifts and accent switching. Imperial conquest and trade have been the major sources of changes and of enrichment in the English language. It is important to note that this is not just a matter of a few new words or borrowings, although much of Britain's imperial and trading past is preserved in such everyday words as 'tomato' and 'cocoa' (Aztec), 'pundit' and 'verandah' (Hindi), 'sofa' (Arabic), 'caravan' (Persian) and 'khaki' (Urdu). Borrowed words for particular items are easily and conveniently assimilated into a language and sometimes a whole area of cultural experience becomes dominated by a foreign tongue. Thus French is the traditional language of much European cooking and Italian is still used in musical notation.

The earlier history of the English language can also be traced in many words used and seen daily. Thus Latin, the language of the Church, the Court and the Law in the distant past, is still with us in such modern forms as 'referendum', 'exit', 'discipline' and 'language'. However, the accidents of history and politics have produced changes in language that go beyond the borrowing or retention of isolated words and phrases. New and distinctive varieties of English have evolved under the pressures of conquest, trade and basic survival. These varieties are known as *pidgins* and *creoles*.

Pidgins and creoles

Many misunderstandings surround pidgin or creole language forms: they are frequently condemned as broken, primitive or bad language. Once again, these pejorative terms are really social judgements and prejudices about the status and lives of the people who use these languages. The linguistic facts are more inter-



esting and more complex. Pidgins develop under conditions of conquest and foreign domination. When two language communities and cultures are thrown together some form of basic language for trade and daily survival must be evolved. The simplified language that emerges is usually based on combining features of the new dominant language (sometimes English, Spanish or French) with vocabulary from indigenous languages in use in the area.

DEFINITION: A pidgin is no one's native language. A pidgin has limited vocabulary, reduced rules of grammar, a narrow range of functions and it is often temporary or short-lived.

Once a pidgin is used extensively, groups of speakers begin to elaborate its simple grammar and vocabulary because they are using it to meet needs and circumstances more complex than simple trading and survival. At this stage the pidgin is on its way to becoming a creole. A creole has a crucial definition: it is a pidgin that has become a genuine first language. It has developed the potential to meet the full range of human language needs, including children's early socialization.

DEFINITION: A creole has developed from a pidgin to become the mother tongue of a community. It has an expanded vocabulary, complex rules of grammar and satisfies an increasing range of functions.

Freezing languages

The desire to stop, or control, language change is found at national and at individual level. It seems that the idea of change in languages is deeply unsettling and provokes reactions whose strength and irrationality confirm that our sense of identity and personal worth is partly rooted in our language. Many of those who complain about language change are middle-aged or older, suggesting a general anxiety about change associated with growing old.

The desire to freeze language at a precise point in time persists and is even tackled nationally in some countries by establishing academies and committees to regulate the language. This has very little effect, particularly on the spoken forms, because language is constantly evolving to meet the needs of its speakers. Language change is never random and chaotic – basic patterns of syntax and phonology are very stable and only certain features alter in predictable ways. The addition of new words and new phrases is not a recipe for confusion: change is balanced by powerful and influential pressures for maintenance and stability. Among these stabilizing influences are the serious media, the formal education system, group pride, loyalty and identity. Fear of language change frequently masquerades as an attempt to protect and preserve the linguistic inheritance, but the fact remains that a language can only die with its last speaker. This process of language death (Crystal, 2000) appears to be accelerating and is driven by changes in worldwide communications, trade, education and traditional occupations, but

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it is not a sign of linguistic ill-health. Language change is evidence of growth and vitality.

Summary

- Human languages are in a constant state of change. Change can affect the areas of syntax, phonology, semantics and lexis.
- The major sources of change are new inventions and technologies, historical and political changes, and group identity and loyalty.
- The areas of vocabulary and the related conceptual ways of thinking are particularly enriched by new inventions and discoveries, and by historical and political changes.
- Historical and political changes and notions of group identity have led to the creation of new languages through the evolution of pidgins and creoles.
- Language change, like many other changes in life, can arouse deep feelings of anxiety and danger. But change may be seen as evidence of the vitality and growth of a language.

Multilingualism

Many individuals living in supposedly homogeneous monolingual societies use more than one language. Patterns of individual movement and settlement between different countries, as well as larger-scale group emigration caused by economic, political, religious and racial pressures mean that, in reality, true monolingual communities are exceptional. This fact comes as a surprise to many monolinguals in Britain, particularly because they speak what is fast becoming the acknowledged world language. But many British citizens are bilingual, using English and a different first language of their family's origin. This family language may be Urdu, Vietnamese, Hindi, Greek, Turkish, Cantonese, Italian, Polish or Arabic. The list could be extended but it is representative of the languages used by children in early years settings and schools in British towns and cities.

Many individuals and families operate more than two languages and can themselves be considered multilingual. It is not uncommon for children to grow up in families where three languages are in active use, including a variety of written forms, and a fourth may be latent but surfaces in songs, rhymes, old tales and memories. This is not just a hypothetical example but a summary of the linguistic home environment of my eldest grandchildren, who also learnt Welsh in school (Engel and Whitehead, 1993).



Learning and teaching suggestions

- With the help of families and community members, create notices in several scripts and languages for the inside and outside play and learning areas.
- Create group/class/setting language inventories by listing all the languages known by children and adults (include examples even if only one or two words are known). As appropriate, explore the use of these languages outside the setting and any knowledge of their societies and countries of origin. Explore any ability to write various scripts and languages among children, parents and practitioners. Involve the families and the community in displaying, discussing and updating the inventory.

Aspects of bilingualism

Definitions

Given the facts of multilingualism in the world, it is not surprising that the definitions of bilingualism for any individual or group are complex and need to be expressed with great flexibility. The definitions should attempt to reflect something of the degrees of competence in two languages, the manner and situations in which they are acquired and used, and whether competence is in the spoken forms only or includes degrees of literacy. Because of these dimensions of complexity, it is now usual for linguists to describe the bilingualism of individuals in terms of a continuum. A speaker's range of bilingual skills can be plotted with reference to oracy and literacy and the fluctuations attributable to age and circumstances. Thus it is possible for individuals to be anywhere between an ideal of complete fluency and literacy in both languages, and simply possessing dormant or very limited understanding of a second language.

Language mixing

Degrees of interchangeability and fluency in thinking, speaking, reading and writing with two languages are partly reflected in the 'language switching' and 'language mixing' typical of many bilinguals, particularly when they are speaking. 'Mixing' tends to be used to describe the combining of words and phrases from both languages in a single utterance, often by young bilingual children who are in the process of learning to separate their two languages. This should not, however, be equated with random muddle or inadequacy. Some very young infants appear to be associating one language with a particular person, activity or situation on a very regular and systematic basis. In the first two or three years of life, the use of particular words from a second language might on occasions be preferred because of their ease of articulation, particularly if the equivalents in the dominant language are phonologically more complex.

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Language switching

This is frequent and usual among older and more fluent bilinguals and can occur at many points in utterances, readings and conversations. Sometimes words are switched, sometimes sentences and sometimes phrases within sentences – the permutations are probably infinite. Linguists explain these switches in terms of several possibilities: simple tiredness and distraction, the lack of a word or concept in one language, a sign of group solidarity and identity, a device to exclude outsiders, a means of emphasis and clarification or an association of certain activities and concepts with one language and culture only. The possibilities are many and complex and emphasize that language switching by bilinguals can be a powerful and subtle tool. There is no linguistic support for the misinformed assumption that this switching is a symptom of inadequate and confused understanding of either or both languages.

'Bucket' myth

Among monolinguals there are considerable misunderstandings about the nature of bilingualism and a readiness to associate it with problems and difficulties in personal, national and educational life. The most pervasive belief implies that the brain must be like a bucket, with a limited capacity for only so much language. To have it full of one language, that is, to be monolingual, must be the natural and ideal linguistic state. To have a second language involves an automatic reduction of the available brain capacity for either language. These naive misconceptions are mainly based on ignorance of how language develops in response to the experiences and the needs of individuals in communities. Such beliefs can, however, permeate and undermine educational policies and strategies for bilingualism and expose children to the damaging effects of institutionalized low expectations.

Bilingual development

Despite all the myths and popular misgivings about the brain's limited language capacity and its tendency for linguistic muddle, many children acquire two languages from birth and are bilinguals on entry to early years group settings and schools. Distinct stages of development can be identified in this process of *simultaneous acquisition* (Crystal, 1997: 363). Initially, the infant acquires a set of words, as in monolingual first language learning, but the words are from both languages. Sentences of two or more grammatical elements, when they appear, contain a mixture of words from both languages. This only lasts a short period of time and the child's increasing vocabulary in each language leads to a growing capacity for translation between the languages. Finally, around the fourth year, the different sets of grammatical rules are separated out (before this happens, one set of grammatical rules seems to be used for both languages). Young bilinguals reveal their awareness that their languages are different in the choices

they make about with whom to use a particular language, as well as where and when each language is appropriate. Such subtle social and linguistic competencies are a far cry from muddle and confusion, and they are demonstrated by children who acquire their two or more languages successively.

Successive bilingualism is usually defined as occurring after the age of 3 and has, therefore, tended to be developed by children when they attend nurseries and primary schools. It is also stimulated by being old enough to play outside the home and of course it occurs among children whose families move between countries and linguistic communities. One positive advantage of successive bilingualism is the fact that the child has already learnt one language and has some general skill in handling people, the environment and linguistic concepts. Young successive bilinguals are also readily engaged in play activities (Figure 2.3) and playful language that supports second language learning linked with meaningful activities and key persons (Ruby et al. 2007). When bilinguals are acquiring other languages they may use a strategy of 'bridge-building' to get from a known language to a new language. This often involves using words from the new language, but they are organized by the grammatical patterns of the securely known language. This is a highly skilled temporary solution called 'inter-language' (Selinker, 1992). Very young bilinguals are also less likely to be self-conscious or upset about trying other language forms and pronunciations. Thus, they quickly get to sound like native speakers.



Figure 2.3 Playful activities for a young bilingual (24 months): writing down a phone message

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Bilingual Britain

The dangers of accepting the general view that bilingualism is a problem or an abnormality are bad enough, but they are also added to by unthinking prejudices about certain languages. To be bilingual in French/English, German/English or Swedish/English can be considered a social and cultural gain in some circles. In Britain there is one nationally established precedent for the provision of a full education service through the medium of a language other than English. This is, of course, the use of Welsh as a first or second language in schools in Wales. However, these positive images of bilingualism do not, it seems, always extend to speakers of Bengali/English, Urdu/English or Turkish/English. This should force us to think about the social attitudes that so sharply differentiate some European languages from languages associated with old imperialism and exploitation.

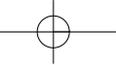
Another strand in the web of irrational fears and attitudes surrounding these specific examples of bilingualism is a deep anxiety about all things foreign and strange. This dormant xenophobia about other races, religions and traditions sometimes emerges as a pseudo-linguistic fear for the survival of English language and traditional culture, particularly in areas of the country with noticeable minority groups and communities. This can have an immediate and damaging impact on local group settings and schools. Fear of a loss of linguistic and cultural dominance is frequently expressed in terms of objections to educational policies concerned with anti-racism, equal opportunities and bilingual instruction in schools.

Learning and teaching suggestions

- Invite families to bring into the setting examples of home language materials and literacy activities they share with their children. Ask the families to help you make these kinds of materials freely available in the setting.
- Organize regular 'teach ourselves another language' days. Make it a self-help effort with tutoring by child and adult speakers of different languages. This may be limited to greetings, counting, songs and rhymes, but it can be enriched by shopping, cooking and eating foods from the different language communities.

Educational policies

Educational policies for multilingualism and first language support teaching for young bilinguals in early years settings and schools highlight a dilemma that may not be peculiar to Britain, but is certainly aggravated by its traditional insularity, monolingual assumptions and linguistic status as the source of a major world language. Most children, whatever their degrees of bilingualism and multilingualism, will be cared for and taught for most of their educational

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careers by monolingual practitioners. The temptation to pressure very young children into being English speakers first and foremost is strong, but this may act against the children's best interests, both as learners and as English speakers. There is a general agreement among many linguists, as well as experienced and successful bilinguals, that some considerable element of first language support in early years care and education settings is highly desirable.

The reasons for this are:

- children's learning and cognitive development increasingly depend on the confident use of a human language that satisfies their personal needs for thinking and planning, as well as structuring their social and cultural interactions with others
- children's self-esteem and confidence, as well as their linguistic and cultural identity, may be undermined if they do not encounter their first language in some significant areas of early years care and educational provision
- if young children's languages are not respected and used in early years settings and school contexts, there is a danger that monolingual practitioners may unconsciously retain damaging lowered expectations and attitudes towards the development and achievements of young potential bilinguals.

Important as these justifications for first language support are, we do have to recognize that they are complicated by the nature of contemporary multilingualism. In most town and city early years children's centres, playgroups, nurseries and schools there are usually several minority languages and the clear identification of one or two dominant tongues is not easy. However, modern approaches to multicultural education emphasize the richness of the contributions linguistic and cultural diversity can make to the ethos and the curriculum of a group setting. There is also much to be said in cognitive and affective terms for putting children into the roles of language teachers and researchers for part of their day. That is to say, we can encourage them to share, investigate and demonstrate their knowledge of other languages. And, by extension, we can invite children's families into our schools, groups and classes to share with us their daily experiences of moving between the language worlds of the wider community and their homes. A determination to bring the children's languages and cultural lives into care and education settings may eventually help to combat the racism that afflicts many of our communities. Such an approach might also counter the misguided belief that there is something deficient or inadequate in languages and writing systems from distant countries.

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Summary

- Multilingualism is the norm in many language communities: patterns of migration caused by economic and political pressures mean that truly monolingual communities are rare.
- Individuals are often bilingual although they, too, can be multilingual. Definitions of bilingualism need to reflect a range of degrees of competence in both spoken and written forms.
- Young bilingual children may use two languages from birth. This is simultaneous bilingualism. Alternatively, they may acquire their second languages after the age of 3 in a process known as successive bilingualism.
- The mixing of languages and the switching of languages are powerful linguistic tools for the bilingual. These skills should not be misguidedly attributed to inadequate and partial language learning.
- Educational policies for an inclusive society need to include provision for first language support for very young bilinguals in early years group settings and schools.
- Policies also need to avoid implicit notions of compensating for, or lessening the significant use of, children's languages other than English as soon as possible in early years settings and schools.

Key terms

Accent: this refers to pronunciation – the sound of the language as it is spoken by an individual or a group. There are regional, social class and educational accents.

Bilingual: this refers to varying degrees of fluency and/or literacy in two languages. 'Bilingual' can refer to an individual or a community.

Dialect: this is a variety of a language, including distinctive vocabulary and syntax.

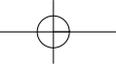
Idiolect: an individual's unique linguistic style.

Jargon: a specialist variety of a language, often associated with professions and occupations, or derived from areas of knowledge like science, technology and the arts.

Multilingual: this refers to degrees of fluency and/or literacy in several languages (in an individual or a community).

Received Pronunciation (RP): a prestigious British accent associated with upper-class influence and power, university education (Oxbridge) and private schooling.

Register: this refers to the repertoire of appropriate styles of language we all use



for different social settings and occasions.

Slang: this is an informal language style and uses a distinctive range of vocabulary and grammatical forms particular to the 'in crowd'.

Standard English (SE): this is the 'norm' or standard dialect for communicating in English in public, educational, professional and commercial settings. There are a number of varieties of SE in Britain and other English-speaking societies.



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