



Exploring the French Language

R. ANTHONY LODGE, NIGEL ARMSTRONG,
YVETTE M. L. ELLIS, JANE F. SHELTON

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R. ANTHONY LODGE,
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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1997 by Hodder Arnold

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in 10/12 pt Sabon by Phoenix Photosetting, Chatham, Kent

ISBN 13: 978-0-340-67661-5 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-340-67662-2 (pbk)

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Preface

One of the problems currently facing French studies in higher education is the widening gap between the approaches to language practised there and those which have been developed in university departments of Linguistics and English Language: the advances made in the latter during the past 25 years have not filtered through sufficiently to the former. The explanation lies principally in the already crowded curricula of Modern Language degrees, combining as they do practical language-learning with the study of literature, area studies and cultural studies as well as language-study. Part of the responsibility rests too, it has to be said, with the highly theoretical and often sectarian attitudes of specialists in linguistics which have deterred many of the most well-meaning students of Modern Languages from entering their area.

Given the centrality of language in the discipline of Modern Languages, this separation has been detrimental. The present volume cannot attempt to transform the situation, but we would like it to contribute to change in a modest way by helping students in the early stages of degrees in French to an understanding of the approach to language adopted so productively by specialists in the various branches of linguistics. It should be stressed, however, that this book is not conceived as an introduction to linguistics. Many excellent books with this aim have been published over the past 25 years. Our aims are more limited: our prime focus is upon French, rather than language in general, and even here we do not pretend to offer a general description of the language. Our goals are simply to show how analytical frames and terminology developed in linguistics can lead to a heightened interest in the French language and to encourage students to further exploration of the subject.

To this end, the bibliographical references placed at relevant points in the text are integral to our aims: they indicate not all the main treatises concerning the different parts of the discipline, but simply key introductory works which beginners should find interesting and which they can be

reasonably expected to understand. They are all grouped together in the general bibliography to be found at the end of the volume. We feel that this mode of presentation will give more precise guidance to the reader than classified lists placed at the end of each chapter. Each chapter in fact concludes with a set of suggestions for seminar activities. No key to the 'right' answers is provided for these, as their prime function is to open the door to discussion not to close it.

The authors would like to thank several first-year cohorts of French Honours students in Newcastle and St Andrews Universities who have taught us which features of French linguistics we need to be clear about, and we extend particular gratitude to Aidan Coveney of Exeter University whose comments on our text have been invaluable.

St Andrews, May 1996

Acknowledgements

The authors and publishers wish to thank the following for their permission to use copyright material:

Geoffrey Bremmer for material from the *Aberystwyth Word Lists*.

Cambridge University Press for material from *Sociolinguistics and Contemporary French* by Dennis Ager, 1990.

Hachette for material from *Et si l'on écrivait correctement le français?* by Michel Massian, 1985.

Hodder and Stoughton Educational for material from *Travaux pratiques* by David Hartley (ed.), 1987, and from *Le français en faculté* (Audio Course) by Brian Farrington, 1980.

Larousse-Bordas for material from *Dictionnaire du français contemporain*, 1971 by Dubois et al., and from *Le parfait secrétaire* by Georges Vivien and Véronique Arné, 1996.

Macmillan for material from *Varieties of Contemporary French* by Malcolm Offord, 1990.

Presses Universitaires de France for material from *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* by Oscar Bloch and Walther von Wartburg, 1991.

Routledge for material from *French: From Dialect to Standard* by R. Anthony Lodge, 1993.

Editions du Seuil for material from *La liaison avec et sans enchaînement* by Pierre Encrevé, 1987.

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Lay-persons versus linguists

Most people interested in foreign languages are concerned primarily to use them for business purposes, for foreign travel, for reading a foreign literature, and so on. At school, pupils learn French with the same practical aim, that of communicating with speakers from the French-speaking world. There comes a time, however, when advanced learners of the language perceive that a simple practical knowledge of the language is insufficient. It is not enough for them to know how to use the language, they need to know *about* it too. Why should this be? An immediate answer might be that such knowledge about the French language may well enhance their learning of it from a practical standpoint, but the issues run deeper.

The French language is more than just a tool for communication, it has a crucial role to play in the way native-speakers of French think about the world and about themselves. Language is central to thought (have you ever considered, for instance, how much thinking you can carry out without the help of words?) and it is central to cultural identity (is language not one of the most basic features distinguishing French civilisation from that of the Germans or Italians?). As a result, if you want to penetrate seriously the way French speakers think, if you want to understand in a non-superficial way the nature of French culture (using this term not just in its aesthetic sense, but also in its broad anthropological sense of 'customs and civilisation of a particular group'), it is important to develop an understanding of what the French language is and how it works. This book is designed to help you with the first steps along this road.

The discipline concerned with the scientific study of language in general is linguistics. This book is not conceived as an introduction to linguistics, for many such books are currently available (see Yule 1985, Hudson 1984). However, what we would like to offer is an introduction to looking at the French language from a linguistic point of view. The

fundamental aim of linguistics has been defined as 'to present in a precise, rigorous and explicit form facts about language which those who speak it as a native-speaker know intuitively'. If you think about this statement, you will see that the linguist's approach to language is very different from that of the lay-person. Thus, in this introductory chapter we will begin by highlighting aspects of the lay-person's attitude to language, and then contrast them with the linguist's approach, in the hope that the reader will thereafter want to follow us down the linguist's route.

1.1 The lay-person's approach to language

The lay-person does not normally spend much time and effort thinking about language. The very deep-seated nature of a speaker's knowledge of their language means that it is very difficult for them to become consciously aware of it and to speak about it. They normally take language completely for granted, often regarding discussions about language as so much time-wasting pedantry. 'Language is for talking about something, it is not something to be talked about.' They tend to be impatient with people examining the way a particular bit of language functions (e.g. the meaning of a particular word or the structure of a particular phrase), and they can afford to be so since language is primarily about getting things done in the practical sphere of our everyday existence. For them it is a tool rather than a structure to be explored. However, the specialist in languages does not have the luxury of dismissing the core of his specialism in such a cavalier fashion.

The fact that the lay-person takes language for granted means that when they are called upon to talk about a feature of language (e.g. what is Geordie/Cockney speech like?), they are usually at a loss to say anything sensible, (a) because they have no terminology or 'metalanguage' to talk precisely about language and (b) because they have no solid theoretical framework within which to develop ideas. However, this inability to pronounce articulately on language matters does not mean that the lay-person has no ideas about language and that they make no implicit assumptions about the subject – language is too central to all of our lives for any of us to get away with that. What it does mean is that the assumptions the lay-person makes are often light-years away from the position taken by linguists after serious reflection.

It is possible to characterise the difference by saying that the lay-person's approach to language is subjective and unsystematic and the linguist's approach is (in theory at least) objective and methodical. Let us look first at subjective attitudes to language current in our society, before tackling the way linguistics approaches the analysis of language.

1.1.1 *Subjective attitudes to language*

A lay-person's attitudes to language are on the whole not objective or detached, but are conditioned by a set of cultural factors which make them subjective, evaluative, prescriptive, i.e. they predispose the lay-person towards making value judgements or statements about what they think is good or bad about a piece of language rather than describing in a detached way what is actually there. The most deeply engrained subjective attitudes to language current in our society usually reflect our attitudes to the people who speak particular languages or dialects and our notions of what is and is not correct, bestowing particular status upon writing as distinct from speech. Let us look at some of the crazy things people say about different languages and varieties of language. You will find further examples in French in Yaguello (1988).

NATIONAL, RACIAL AND SOCIAL STEREOTYPING

Consider the following clichés about particular languages:

- 'Italian is a very musical language'
- 'German is a harsh and guttural language'
- 'Spanish is a very romantic language'

Such statements are frequently trotted out in everyday talk about language, but if you examine them you will see that they tell us nothing at all about the structure of Italian, German and Spanish. What they do reveal, however, is the way we tend to stereotype the speakers of those languages: in the British popular imagination, Italians are still widely associated with opera, Germans with jackboots and Spaniards with guitars and flamenco dancing. Have you ever heard tell of a German complaining to one of his compatriots about how 'harsh' is their mother-tongue upon the ear?

Now consider the following statement taken from Yaguello (1988: 131):

Ah, vous faites du Wolof [Senegalese language]. Ça doit être une langue assez simple, non?

Lay-persons commonly assume that languages spoken by people in undeveloped countries are in some sense simpler, more primitive languages than our own. British explorers travelling, say, in Uganda in the late nineteenth century, may be described as speaking a 'language' (i.e. English), whereas their native-bearers speak only 'dialect' (i.e. Luganda). When linguists analyse these 'primitive' languages they invariably discover that there is nothing simple or primitive about their internal structure at all, and that in this respect all languages are in fact equally complex. Those people who speak about simple, primitive languages in Africa or in South America are usually basing their approach on racial stereotypes and a naive belief in the superiority of Western culture.

In a similar way, when lay-persons discuss different varieties of their own language (e.g. Brummie English, Geordie English, Cockney), they often speak of them not in a detached way, but in an evaluative, hierarchical way, invariably regarding some varieties as 'better' than others. Low value is attributed to the speech of groups in our society with low power and status, and vice versa. Thus, the girl from middle-class suburbia will be said to speak 'nicely', while her working-class cousin on the council estate will have 'slovenly', 'lazy' speech. Rural varieties are regarded more favourably than lower-class urban ones – in Britain at least, though in France attitudes to rural varieties are often less favourable. What constitutes 'good' and 'bad' in English? There is nothing objectively better about the Queen's English than about Geordie English (nor, come to that, between American Standard English and Black English Vernacular). It is just that in our society we have been brought up to believe that the Queen's English is 'better' in view of her superior social position. This tells us more about social stratification in our society than the linguistic properties of particular dialects (see Milroy and Milroy 1991).

Subjective attitudes to language like these have no sound intellectual basis, but they can have disturbing social consequences if they are not recognised and controlled. A report was made about a lecturer who gave an identical lecture on two consecutive evenings. On the first evening he spoke standard English and was roundly congratulated for the excellence of his ideas. On the second evening he pronounced exactly the same words, but in a Brummie accent. Certain members of the audience left after a few minutes. Others complained bitterly at the end of the lecture about the foolishness of the lecturer's ideas. For further information on subjective attitudes to varieties of English see Giles (1970), and to varieties of French see Gueunier *et al.* (1978) and Hawkins (1993).

One often hears lay-persons declaring very confidently that 'English is a very beautiful language' and that French is particularly 'clear' and 'logical'. Witness the following statement made by President Mitterrand, while opening an exhibition devoted to the French language:

A propos de la langue française, il est difficile d'ajouter, après tant d'autres des éloges tant de fois répétés sur sa rigueur, sa clarté, son élégance, ses nuances, la richesse de ses temps et de ses modes, la délicatesse de ses sonorités, la logique de son agencement.

(quoted by Yaguello 1988: 122–23)

Statements like this raise issues beyond those of social or national stereotyping, and reveal the lay-person's inability to make an important distinction: between language as a system and language in use. By language as a system we mean the abstract set of phonological, lexical and grammatical rules which a speaker subconsciously puts into practical application (use) when he/she speaks. It is impossible to demonstrate the superiority of one language system (e.g. French, English) over another: no language system can be inherently more beautiful, more clear, more logical than another. What

does differ, however, is the ability of individual speakers to make use of the system: some people are very proficient users of the language, others less so. Some people can write very beautiful poetry, most of us cannot. For more ideas on this topic see Milroy and Milroy (1991: 15). It brings us to the second set of subjective attitudes to language current among lay-persons, namely the belief in the superiority of written over spoken use of language.

SPEECH, WRITING AND PRESCRIPTIVISM

Deeply engrained in European consciousness is the belief that writing is a superior form of language to speaking. With the spread of literacy in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the ability to read and write became a touchstone of the educated, even of the intelligent person. So, a person who cannot write properly is nowadays regarded as educationally and even, in some way, cognitively deficient. In this connection, a high premium is set on the ability to spell correctly, particularly in France where spelling competitions have become something of a national spectator sport. Attribution of a high value to writing has meant a corresponding reduction in the value attributed to speaking – speaking is regarded by many people as an inferior form of language to writing. We ought allegedly to speak as we write, but since most of us are not able to do this, our speech is regarded as a corrupt, degenerate version of writing. Statements like the following are commonly heard, even on the lips of teachers of Modern Languages: ‘Speaking is *less grammatical* than writing.’ A formulation like this is much more problematic than it seems, not only because of the implication it unthinkingly carries of the superiority of writing over speech, but also because of the woolliness and lack of precision in its use of the word ‘grammatical’. The terms ‘grammatical’ and ‘grammar’ are frequently bandied about by lay-persons pontificating on the decline in educational standards, but their own use of these terms is often highly confused. Let us consider some of the meanings attributed to the word ‘grammar’ in contemporary English (for further discussion see Palmer 1971: 11–13):

- 1 ‘She finds learning Russian difficult because she does not have much *grammar*.’ – here the word means terms for talking about language, ‘linguistic terminology’ or ‘metalanguage’.
- 2 ‘She’ll never get on in the Civil Service because her *grammar* is so bad.’ – here the word means the ‘norms of correct English usage’.
- 3 ‘English doesn’t have much *grammar*, but German and Latin have a lot.’ – here the word implies complex verb and noun systems (conjugations and declensions).
- 4 ‘*Grammar* is a systematic description of a language as found in a sample of speech or writing’ – a linguist’s definition of the term (see Crystal 1991 (3rd edn): 141).

Clearly, the word 'grammar' in modern English (and in French too) is open to a range of interpretations, so it is important to make it clear which meaning we intend, whenever we use it. Speaking may be 'less grammatical than writing' if we take definition (2), since the normative rules of correct English usage tend to be based on writing rather than speech, but it would constitute an absurd claim, if we were to take definition (4), for all language (written and spoken) is of necessity systematic and rule-governed: if it were not, no two people could understand one another (all speakers of the same language have to follow more or less the same system).

In this way, dealing with the meanings of the word 'grammar' also forces us to confront different uses of the word 'rule': a 'prescriptive' (or 'normative') rule lays down the law about how you think something ought to be organised; a 'descriptive' rule is a statement about how something actually is organised. Speech is no less rule-governed than writing (in the 'descriptive' sense). It just happens that the rules governing speech are not the same as the rules governing writing. We will be looking at the differences in the next chapter. Linguists are not centrally concerned with 'prescriptive rules', that is to say that they are not interested in showing the superiority of one form of language use over another. What do preoccupy them, however, are descriptive rules: how are they to describe in the neatest and most powerful way the linguistic systems which people use?

In order to make progress in linguistics, it is important to shed a lot of the lay-person's subjective attitudes to language. We need to accept that all varieties of language are equally valid as communication, provided they are used in the appropriate milieu and for the appropriate purpose. We need to be objective in our approach and methodical in our analysis.

1.2 The linguist's approach to language

Linguists have to begin their analysis by divesting themselves of the subjective assumptions about language we have just described. They must try to 'get back to basics'. This involves making explicit statements about things which speakers do intuitively, without thinking. The lay-person can find this sort of activity rather frustrating and tedious but we hope language students will find it more congenial. In this section we will first of all explore some of the basic characteristics of human languages, then examine how linguists organise their study of the phenomenon through the various branches of their discipline.

1.2.1 *The basic characteristics of human languages*

Speech is a faculty possessed by human beings, and it is often said that it is language which distinguishes man from beasts. However, man is not the

only living creature which possesses the means of communicating with his fellows. So what is so special about human languages?

We need first of all to distinguish between two different types of signal – *informative* signals (involving ‘natural meaning’) and *communicative* signals (involving ‘non-natural’ meaning). The difference between them is one of intentionality. For example, dishevelled hair and bags under her eyes signal to me that student X has had a bad night and that she hasn’t managed to finish her essay. Her signals are informative, but they were probably not intentional. Student Y, on the other hand, declares openly ‘Could I have an extension on my essay? I’ve been very busy recently and it’s not finished yet.’ This signal is communicative, and it is only this type of signal which is involved in language.

What are the characteristics of human languages which set them apart from animal communication systems? Linguists have identified five basic features (see Aitchison 1992: 25–30).

- 1 *learnability*: Human children are born with the ability to acquire language, though after the age of 10 this ability declines rapidly. Moreover, they can learn any human language. A French child reared in a Chinese-speaking environment will grow up speaking perfect Chinese. Animals and birds, on the other hand, can acquire no language other than the one transmitted from their parents. Human beings can of course learn several human languages, and linguists often distinguish between ‘first language acquisition’ (what you did when you were a baby) and ‘second language learning’ (what people do at school or evening classes).
- 2 *cultural transmission*. the capacity to acquire language is innate in humans, that is, it is part of our genetic make-up. However, the actual language we acquire depends on the people who bring us up, that is, it is transmitted ‘culturally’. The calls of birds and animals on the other hand are species-specific and are broadly the same the world over. They are transmitted genetically.
- 3 *displacement*: the messages communicated by animals and birds relate only to the immediate needs of and environment inhabited by the creature in question. Human languages can refer to entities totally displaced from the immediate situation. They can refer to other places, other times and, indeed, to abstract concepts which have no physical existence anywhere at all.
- 4 *arbitrariness*: some signs in language are directly linked to or ‘motivated by’ the things they stand for, e.g. *coucou*, *cocorico*, *chuchoter*. These are onomatopoeic words which stand in *iconic* relationship with what they refer to, i.e. they reproduce in their sound the sounds they stand for. However, onomatopoeic words are the exception rather than the rule in human languages. Most words are conventional and arbitrary, that is to say that there is no natural connection between the sounds of a word and

the thing it stands for. This quality of arbitrariness endows human languages with great flexibility, but it also leads to the great diversity which exists between the languages of the world.

- 5 *creativity, productivity*: man has been described as ‘the articulate mammal’. Animals and birds have their communication systems, but the number of messages they can transmit is extremely limited. Normally each call carries its own message (e.g. fear, anger, desire to mate, etc.), but it cannot be broken down into smaller components which can be re-used in different combinations to produce new individualised messages. It is true that much human language is formulaic and ritualistic. ‘How do you do?’ looks like a question, but people would look oddly at you if you replied with a description of your state of health. That said, most language can be analysed into smaller components which can in turn be re-used in new permutations to produce, to create an unlimited number of messages never transmitted before. The French linguist André Martinet (1970: 13–15) drew attention to what he calls *la double articulation du langage* whereby each human language selects a limited number of basic sounds (‘phonemes’ – French has 34 of them). These have no meaning in themselves and represent the ‘first articulation’. At a second stage these basic sound units are strung together (‘articulated’ as in ‘articulated lorry’) in diverse combinations (words, phrases, clauses and sentences) to generate an unlimited number of messages.

1.2.2 *The priority of speech*

We shall be looking in some detail at the differences between speech and writing in the next chapter. Here we will simply point out that, unlike laypersons, linguists give no special priority to the written language. Indeed, for a variety of reasons they have to give priority to speech:

- 75 per cent of the world’s languages have no written form;
- historically, writing developed many thousands of years after the development of speech;
- children learn to speak before they can write and many never learn to write at all;
- much more speech ‘happens’ than writing;
- writing is ultimately derived from speech and not the other way round.

1.2.3 *The branches of linguistics*

In order to analyse such a complex thing as human language linguists need to be not only as objective as possible, but also as rigorous and methodical

as they can. This means, among other things, that the terminology they employ has to be clear and unambiguous. The technical terms they use can be off-putting, but this is no cause for alarm. A glossary of linguistic terms is to be found at the back of this book, and there exist excellent tools like the *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* which can be of great assistance (see Crystal 1991).

Language can be looked at from two very different perspectives – as *system* and as *behaviour*. The first is concerned with the internal structuring of a language, the second with the psychological and social behaviour of human beings when they make use of language.

LANGUAGE AS SYSTEM

We have just seen how human languages contrive to generate an unlimited number of utterances on the basis of a strictly limited number of basic sounds (Standard French has 34 phonemes, Standard English has 44). They succeed in this because they are profoundly systematic, structured and patterned. Linguists generally distinguish three levels of patterning:

- | | | | |
|-----|------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| I | sound patterns | > | phonetics
phonology |
| II | word patterns | > | lexicology
morphology
syntax |
| III | meaning patterns | > | semantics |

Let us look briefly at each of these in turn.

I Sound patterns

Phonetics and phonology are both concerned with the sounds of a language, but in significantly different ways. *Phonetics* looks to provide a scientific description of the raw sounds used in speech. Various instruments are available to enable us to analyse speech sounds very precisely, e.g. labiograms, palatograms, etc. The former, for instance, plots the shape of the lips during speech and the latter allows us to produce accurate pictures of tongue contact with the roof of the mouth. At an early stage in the development of phonetics as a science it was realised that the traditional way of representing speech in writing (spelling) was inadequate for scientific purposes. Sometimes the same sound receives different spellings (e.g. *vers*, *vert*, *verre*); sometimes the same spelling represents different sounds (e.g. *cough*, *through*, *thought*, *plough*). As a result, phoneticians have designed special systems which provide a one-to-one equivalence of sound and letter. The most widely used phonetic system is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and you can find it being used to set out the speech sounds of French at the beginning of most French dictionaries.

Phonology looks at the sounds of language in a more abstract way. Phoneticians are able to detect very subtle distinctions between the various speech sounds used in natural language. Did you know, for instance, that the [p] in *pin* is not quite the same as the [p] in *spin*? The first [p] is slightly aspirated, i.e. breathed, whereas the latter is not. Such distinctions are of great importance to phoneticians, but matter less to phonologists. Phonologists are interested only in those distinctions of sound which are used by a particular language to differentiate meaning.

II Word patterns

Lexicology is the branch of linguistics devoted to the study of words: what are the words which exist in a particular language? Where do they come from? How are they formed? An important part of lexicology is *lexicography* (the science of compiling dictionaries). No dictionary is a simple list of words. Dictionaries are human creations reflecting the pre-occupations and prejudices of the people who compile them. No two dictionaries are the same. They all differ in the way they select, classify and explain the words they contain. It is, therefore, unhelpful to say 'I found this word in the dictionary.' We need to know which dictionary.

Morphology is concerned with the way words are built up from smaller elements known as 'morphemes'. There are two types of morphology: *derivational morphology* and *inflectional morphology*. The former is a branch of lexicology and is concerned to find out how different words are made up in a particular language out of the morphemes available. Words are composed of roots and affixes (prefixes and suffixes), e.g. *anti/ségrégationn/ iste*. Inflectional morphology is related to syntax and is concerned with the way one and the same word varies its form according to the syntactic function it is performing. Thus the verb *venir* changes shape according to person, tense and mood. For example,

- (1) *je viens*
tu viens
il vient
nous venons
vous venez
ils viennent

The word *syntax* is derived from two Greek words meaning 'together joining'. This branch of linguistics is concerned with the rules for combining words into higher units (phrases, clauses and sentences) in a particular language. It is about the structure of sentences. A question you might ask is where does *grammar* fit into all this. The grammar of a language is the set of linguistic rules which speakers know intuitively and which they activate when they use their language. For some linguists the rules of grammar cover everything (pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary), but for most, grammar involves essentially morphology and syntax.

III Meaning patterns

The 'deepest' of the three levels of structure in language is that of meaning. There are many facets to the concept of 'meaning': we can talk of the meaning of individual words (lexical meaning), the meaning added when words are put into sentences (grammatical meaning) and the meaning acquired by utterances when they are used in particular social contexts (social meaning).

The branch of linguistics concerned centrally with meaning is *semantics*. Semanticists are concerned with different types of meaning (word meaning versus sentence meaning, conceptual versus associative meaning, linguistic versus contextual meaning). They confront issues such as the role of language in the way we formulate ideas – is it possible to think without words? If it is, how do words help us clarify our thoughts? Do all languages analyse the world in the same way? If they don't, how much of our world-view stems from the language we speak?

LANGUAGE AS BEHAVIOUR

A second way of looking at language is to see it not as an internal system but as a form of human behaviour. Linguistic behaviour can be observed at the level of the minds of individual speakers and at the level of human groups, even whole societies.

I Psycholinguistics

This is the branch of linguistics concerned with what happens in an individual's brain when he or she speaks. There are two directions of study here: (1) What is the role of language in our normal thought processes? Is there part of the brain which is reserved for the 'faculty' of language? (2) What are the mental processes underlying the planning, production, perception and comprehension of speech? How do we acquire language as infants? What happens when we attempt to learn a second or third language? For an introduction to this subject see Aitchison (1992).

II Sociolinguistics

This branch of linguistics looks at linguistic behaviour not in terms of an individual's psychological mechanisms but in terms of the social groups to which he/she belongs. What are the ways in which language affects society and how does society affect language? In what ways does a language vary according to who is using it? – different groups of speakers (different social classes, different sex- and age-groups, different ethnic groups) produce their own varieties of a language (inter-speaker variation). In what ways does a language vary according to what it is being used for? – individual speakers will vary their use of the language according to the situation in which they

find themselves (intra-speaker variation). Closely linked with sociolinguistics is *dialectology* which examines in particular the way a language varies across geographical space. For an introduction to this subject see Trudgill (1995).

III Pragmatics

This branch of linguistics brings together the two aspects of language, system and behaviour. It investigates the relationship between language and context, laying bare 'the nature of the assumptions participants [in a conversation] are making, and the purposes for which utterances are being made' (Levinson 1983: 53). If the linguist is to uncover the rules which govern a person's speech, they must work out their grammatical competence (i.e. their internalised knowledge of the linguistic system). However, the linguist must also uncover the rules which govern the speaker's ability to function in society and apply language to real-life situations (communicative competence and linguistic behaviour). 'The goal of a broad theory of (language) competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systemically possible, the feasible and the appropriate produce actually occurring cultural behaviour' (Hymes 1971: 286). How do we utilise the linguistic system in our everyday social behaviour? How do we make what we say appropriate to the situational context in which we are saying it and to the people we are addressing? What functions do we ask language to perform in our daily lives and what linguistic mechanisms do we activate to enable us to perform them?

Some linguists include within the general area of 'pragmatics' the two related activities of *discourse analysis* (what regularities can be discovered in chunks of text larger than individual sentences?) and *conversation analysis* (how do conversations work?). It is within this area too that we can locate the study of *stylistics*: the investigation of the configuration of linguistic features which characterise particular written texts (often literary, but not necessarily).

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

An essential feature of human languages is that they are constantly changing. A language which has ceased to change is a dead language, a language with no speakers. All aspects of a language we have sketched in above can then be looked at from two points of view: from the point of view of the language as it functions at a given point in time, and from that of the language as it changes over the course of time. The former approach is referred to as 'synchronic' and the latter as 'diachronic'. Explaining how and why a language changes is one of the central goals of linguistics. For an introduction to this subject see Aitchison (1981).

Seminar exercises

1. Assemble as many other clichés about language as you can and attempt to see what hidden subjective attitudes lie behind them.
2. To what extent can linguistics be regarded as a 'science'?
3. Explain what the term *arbitrariness* means as it is used to describe a property of human language.

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Varieties of French

In countries like Britain and France with long traditions of literacy, the population is very strongly aware of the existence of the standard language. A standard language is a set of rules or norms prescribing what is and what is not correct in all aspects of language (pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary). The standard forms of English and French are what are taught to foreign learners, in the initial stages at least. They took many centuries to be developed and codified, and are based historically on the usage of the most powerful people in society (in English we still talk about 'the Queen's English') and upon the written form of the language (we are often enjoined to speak as we write since writing is widely felt to be 'more correct'). In France the 'ideology of the standard' (the belief that everyone should use the language in the same prescribed way) is particularly strong, no doubt in view of the role of the French language in definitions of French national identity, see Lodge (1993: 2–3).

Defenders of the French standard language, guardians of usage like school-teachers of French, the *Académie française*, operate on the assumption that the ideal state for a language is one of uniformity and that everyone should speak (and write) in the same way. They appear to believe there is only one acceptable form of the language and that deviations from that norm should be suppressed. They usually maintain that the standard form of the language is inherently better (i.e. clearer, more logical, more beautiful) than other varieties and should, therefore, always be adhered to. Sometimes such people are referred to as 'purists', i.e. people who want to keep linguistic usage free of contamination from new forms (neologism), low-status forms (e.g. slang) and foreign elements (e.g. anglicisms).

It is of course essential in modern societies that there exists a standard language, for reasons of communicative efficiency. However, it is illusory to believe that linguistic norms are anything but artificial constructs, that the standard variety is linguistically 'better' than non-standard varieties, and that complete linguistic uniformity can ever be brought about. Living