

Sociolinguistics: Language in Its Social Context

7

Our orientation up to now has been to language as a structured system of signs. In this and the following three chapters we aim to place language firmly in its human environment, and attend to it as a human phenomenon. We begin in this chapter by considering language from the perspective of the uses speakers put it to in their social lives. We will be concerned, that is, with the social aspects of the meaning-making potential of the language system in its context of use. This area of investigation is called sociolinguistics.

Chapter contents

Goals	156
Key terms	156
7.1 Language as a social phenomenon	156
7.2 Social varieties and variation	158
7.3 Varieties and variation according to use	164
7.4 Language use in bilingual communities	167
7.5 Language shift and endangerment	171
Summing up	175
Guide to further reading	176
Issues for further thought and exercises	176
Notes	178

Goals

The goals of the chapter are to:

- describe how languages vary systematically according to social factors, and identify the main types of variation;
- show how speakers vary their ways of speaking – including the language they choose to speak – to construct personal identities and social roles for themselves in speech interactions;
- identify some of the factors relevant to language choice in bilingual communities;
- discuss how and why habits of language use can change over time, and possible consequences of these changes to the vitality of a language; and
- overview the increase in rate of language endangerment and extinction in recent centuries, and concerns of speakers and linguists to arrest the processes.

Key terms

accents	gender variation	language maintenance/revival	secret varieties
accommodation	identity	language shift	social varieties
bilingualism	isogloss	register	speech community
code-switching	language choice	registerial variation	standard dialect
dialects	language endangerment/ obsolescence/death	respect varieties	style
dialectal variation			

7.1 Language as a social phenomenon

Social domains of language use

All speech occurs in an interactive context in which interactants – speakers and hearers – make choices from the linguistic system. These include lexical and grammatical choices that express appropriate experiential meaning, that is, meaning concerned with the construal of the world of experience (see §5.4). This is only part of the story. As discussed in §4.5, words are not always neutral signs, but often express attitudinal values, as for instance when one says *pass away* instead of *die*. This is not the only way that words can be charged with non-experiential meaning. Words can also convey social information about the speaker. For instance, if an Australian is thanked for doing someone a favour, they would be likely to

respond with *No worries*, while an American is likely to say *You're welcome*. On one level these expressions mean the same thing, but choice of one rather than another is consistent with the norms – the typical speech patterns – of Australian English versus American English.

A person's membership in a social groups – for example, the British community, a rural farming community, or an immigrant community in an urban area – will correlate with the use of certain linguistic forms and patterns of behaviour in preference to others. Some linguistic forms and behaviours interactants use represent part of the relatively stable aspect of a person's social identity; these forms indicate who the speakers are. Here variation in language is according to the speaker.

But not all choices are like this. A speaker of Australian English might say *Please take a seat* or *Grab a chair* when offering the addressee a place to sit. These forms do not mark the speaker as being an Australian so much as correlate with the particular aspects of the immediate context of speech, and the temporary roles they adopt. Imagine a university lecturer and student in a formal interview concerning the student's failure in a test. After a greeting, the lecturer might invite the student to sit down with *Please take a seat* – which could well sound ominous to the student, and hint that something unpleasant was to follow. Later, the two may happen to meet in a bar; the lecturer might invite the student to join her with *Grab a chair*. Here the choice of different expressions has to do with the speech context, and the respective roles the interactants take on; it does not concern the speaker's social identity in the sense of their group membership. This is variation according to use.

These two social features and their linguistic correlates are summarized in the first two columns of Table 7.1. In the third column are indicated the most general social functions or macro-functions associated with the linguistic devices within their domains of use. The languages and social varieties one controls, as well as the varieties associated with uses, go together to construct a participant's identity as a person: they concern who the person is, the dimension of 'being'. This contrasts with the 'doing' dimension where the concern is with how the language system is used to accomplish things in speech. In this chapter we focus on the former dimension, 'being things with words', ignoring the latter, 'doing things with words', which is dealt with in part under pragmatics (§6.3) and in part in the chapter on discourse on the accompanying website.

These rather terse observations will be elaborated more fully in the remainder of this chapter, beginning with the 'being; construction of personal identity' macro-function. To be sure, Table 7.1 gives an oversimplified picture: the distinction between social varieties and



Table 7.1 A model of the major phenomena relevant to the sociolinguistics of language use

Social phenomenon	Linguistic manifestation	Social macro-function
Community	Languages and social varieties	Being; construction of personal identity
Interactive context	Varieties according to use	Being; construction of social role

varieties according to use is not as clear cut as a simple contrast between temporary social role and permanent personal identity. Nevertheless, it provides a useful initial perspective on the complex phenomena of language variation and use. Before embarking on this enterprise, however, it is important to say a few words about the notion of speech community, since it plays a crucial role in the story.

The speech community

A speech community is a coherent group of people who share the same language or languages and more or less the same norms of language use. The members of a speech community form a network of interacting individuals who communicate linguistically with one another frequently, and more intensively than they engage with outsiders.

The term 'speech community' is somewhat elastic, and may be used of groups of radically different sizes depending on one's focus. From the broadest perspective, the speakers of English form a single speech community, with overall more frequent in-group interactions than out-group interactions; they also share what is in some sense the same language, and use it in at least some common ways, even if there are some differences in how they use it in specific circumstances. So also might the speakers of British English or Cockney be regarded as forming speech communities. What is required for a group of speakers to represent a speech community is a degree of unity and cohesiveness both on the level of the language system(s) and on the level of interpersonal interactions. A random selection of a million speakers of English drawn from the UK, the USA, New Zealand and India would fail to meet this condition, and does not form a speech community. Nor do the speakers of English and Cantonese together form a speech community.

7.2 Social varieties and variation

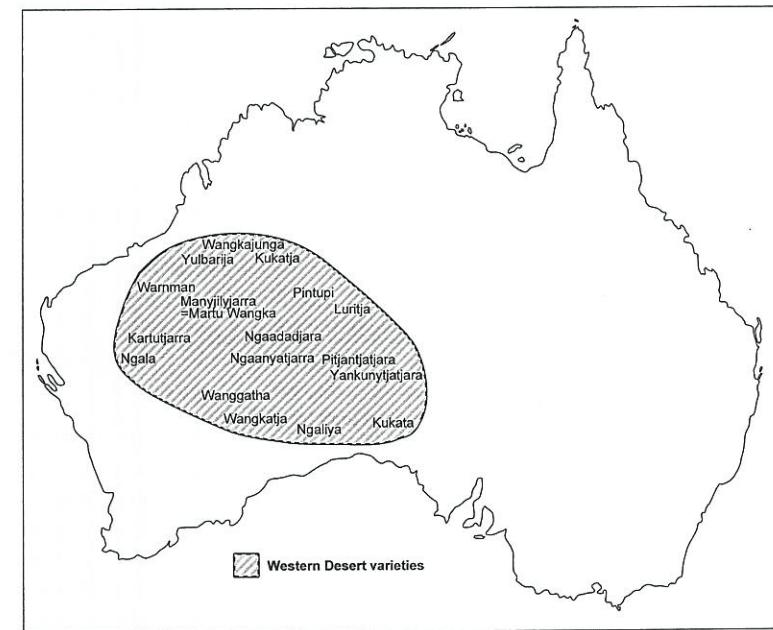
Regional variation

No language with a reasonable number of speakers spread over a relatively wide territory will have a completely homogenous grammar and lexicon, and differences in pronunciation, words or grammar are likely to be associated with different regions. Such variation is called **dialectal variation**; varieties of a language with their own peculiarities of grammar, phonology, phonetics or lexicon and associated with particular geographical regions are **dialects**. The term **accent** is used in reference to varieties that differ only phonetically or phonologically; the term 'dialect' is used more generally when there are differences in lexicon and grammar, and possibly also phonetics as well.

The Austronesian language Taba, spoken by some 30,000–40,000 people living mainly on Makian Island, near the island of Halmahera in Indonesia, shows minor dialectal differences in each village. These include a small number of lexical differences; a phonological difference (in the speech of some villages an /o/ is found where others have /a/), and a grammatical

difference (in some dialects the singular/plural contrast is made only on human nouns, while in others it is made for all animate nouns).

The differences between neighbouring dialects of a language are insufficient to make speech in one dialect unintelligible to speakers of another; dialects are variant forms of a single language, not distinct languages (see also §13.1). However, if a language is spread over a very large region, speakers from opposite extremes of the region may not be able to understand one another, or may experience difficulties in understanding one another, and misunderstandings may be frequent. Nevertheless, neighbouring varieties will be mutually intelligible, and the language can be seen as a chain of mutually intelligible dialects. Such situations are called dialect continua. An example is the so-called Western Desert language (Pama-Nyungan) spoken over the vast desert region of Australia shown in Map 7.1. The named varieties in this map differ from one another mainly in lexicon, and slightly in grammar. Geographically close varieties are similar enough to be mutually intelligible; distant ones such as Yulbarija in the far north-west and Kukata in the extreme south-east are more divergent, and not everything said in one would be immediately understood by a speaker of the other.



Map 7.1 Varieties of the Western Desert language.

Mutually unintelligible forms of speech like Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese are thus separate languages; they are not dialects in the linguistic sense, contrary to popular usage, and terminology in common use in Chinese linguistics in China.

Standard dialects

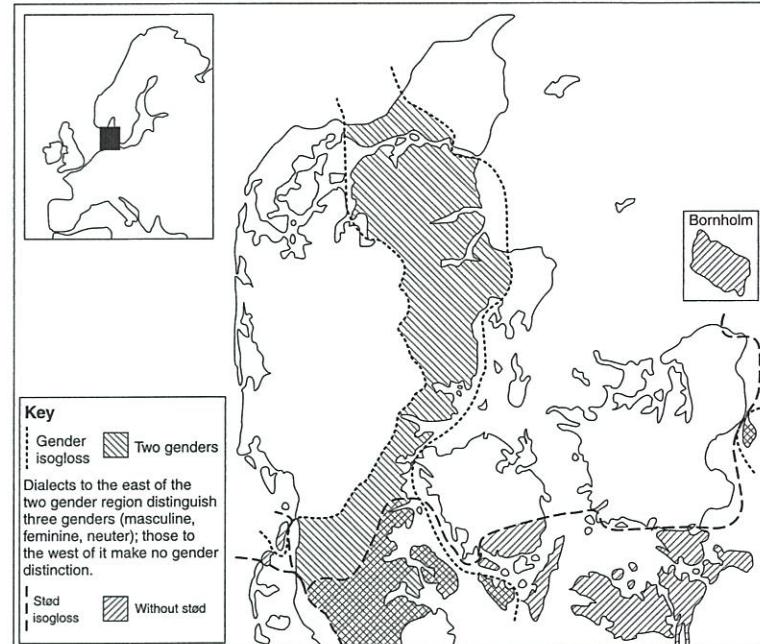
Sometimes one dialect of a language will be recognized as the most important or **standard dialect** of the language. This is usually the most prestigious dialect, and regarded as the most 'correct' form of speech. For languages with longish traditions of writing such as English and French, the standard is the variety promoted in schools, and children are usually taught to write in it; it is also the variety most likely to be heard on national broadcasting networks. The standard is usually the variety that is codified in grammars, dictionaries and style guides. In the case of English, somewhat different standards have emerged in different countries, so we have Standard American English, Standard Australian English, Standard British English, Standard New Zealand English and so on. If a general Standard English can be identified, it would be something of an abstraction, characterized by features common to the national standards.

Not all languages have standard dialects. The traditional languages of Australia did not have standard varieties; it is only in post-contact times that some traditional languages have acquired standard varieties. These are often the varieties that have, by a quirk of history, been the ones that missionaries have worked on, and perhaps produced bible translations in, or that educators have happened to choose as the standard for literacy materials.

Notice that linguistic usage of the term *dialect* differs from popular usage, where a dialect is understood to be a non-standard or substandard variety of a language and the standard variety is not regarded as a dialect. In linguistics, both standard and non-standard varieties are dialects.

Isoglosses

In dialectology, the study of dialects, it is standard practice to use **isoglosses**, lines drawn on a map to mark the boundaries of regions in which a particular feature is found, whether it is a particular lexical item, a characteristic feature of pronunciation, grammatical feature or whatever. These are a bit like isobars on a weather map, which bound regions of the same barometric pressure. Map 7.2 shows the isogloss for the Danish *stød*,¹ which runs in an east-west direction. It also shows isoglosses for genders,² which run in a north-south direction. As this indicates, isoglosses do not always coincide. Generally, however, boundaries of major dialects are marked by bunching of isoglosses.



Map 7.2 Two isoglosses in Danish.

Variation according to social group

Many societies in today's world are stratified according to socio-economic status. In industrialized Western societies stratification depends on income, education, occupation and so on. Sociolinguists commonly identify two classes according to these variables: working class (generally with lower levels of education and in manual or semi-skilled employment) and middle class (generally with higher levels of education, and working in non-manual professional jobs). Both of these can be further divided into upper, middle and lower. Sometimes lower and upper classes are also distinguished. These classes (in Western societies) form a scale of variation rather than a set of rigidly distinct and precisely delimited classes.

One investigation, undertaken by William Labov in the late 1960s, studied social stratification in the speech of New York City residents according to a number of linguistic variables (Labov 1972). One was the phonetic realization of /θ/, which in New York City has three variants, [θ], [tθ], and [t]. Across various styles of speech, Labov found a consistent correlation

between social class and the phonetic variable. For a given level of formality, the higher the speaker's socio-economic status the greater was the tendency to use the fricative allophone [θ], and the lower the speaker's status, the more affricate and stop allophones they used. Moreover, there was a fairly large gap between lower- and working-class speakers on the one hand, and middle-class speakers on the other.

Use of these linguistic variables is a matter of frequency; it is not an all or nothing affair. No social class in New York City is totally consistent use of any of the allophones. Furthermore, for each class, use of the prestigious variant [θ] increases with the degree of formality of speech. The variation thus concerns the notion of style (see the box on p. 165).

Variation according to gender

Men and women probably speak differently in all human societies. Some differences have a biological foundation: across populations males tend to have larger vocal folds than females, and thus the fundamental frequency tends to be lower in the speech of males than females. However, biology does not fix even this, and the differences can be exaggerated, as is the case in Japanese where the pitch differences between the genders are more marked than in English, due to female Japanese speakers tending to use higher pitches than English-speaking females. This has been confirmed experimentally by Y. Ohara, reported in Coulmas (2005: 37). Ohara recorded conversations and sentences read in Japanese and English by the same speakers, and found that the women used higher pitch when speaking Japanese than English, while men used the same pitch in both languages.

Differences in speech between the genders are often a matter of degree rather than kind, although in some languages there are features that are unique to either males or females.

In English the situation is of the former kind, that is, a matter of degree rather than kind. A number of linguistic features tend to pattern differently for men and women. It is documented, for instance, that women tend to have, and habitually use, larger vocabularies of colour terms than men, including terms such as *mauve*, *lavender*, *crimson*, *violet*, *beige* and so on. Differences also exist in usage of non-standard grammatical forms such as double negatives (as in *I never did nothing*), use of the /m/ allomorph of the -ing verb suffix (as in *eating*), and non-standard past tense forms such as *seen* instead of *saw* (as in *I seen it the other day*). Numerous studies have shown these non-standard features to be more common in the speech of males than females.

In some languages categorical differences are found in the speech of males and females, certain forms being peculiar to one gender. In Gros Ventre (Algonquian, USA) alveolar and palatal affricates in men's speech correspond with velar stops in women's speech. Sidamo (Afroasiatic, Ethiopia) has lexical items peculiar to men's and women's speech. For example, the word for 'four' is *rore* in women's speech, and *foole* in men's speech.

In Japanese there are differences in grammatical morphemes. For example, the first and second person pronoun forms are *atashi* 'I' and *anata* 'you' in women's speech, but *boku* 'I' and

Table 7.2 Bound pronouns in women's and men's varieties of Yanyuwa

	Women	Men	
	Male	Masculine	Male-Masculine
Nominative	<i>ilu-</i>	<i>inju-</i>	<i>ilu-</i>
Accusative	<i>anya-</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>ø-</i>

kimi 'you' in men's speech. There are also a number of lexical differences: *kite* 'come' of female speech corresponds to *koi* in the speech of males. Japanese also has a number of sentence-final particles used for expressing politeness. Some of these are unique to the speech of males, others to the speech of females. In addition, a range of particles are used by both male and female speakers, but in different frequencies: some are used predominantly by males, some predominantly by females and a few with about the same frequency by both.

In the Australian language Yanyuwa (Pama-Nyungan) there is an even more fundamental grammatical difference between male and female speech. In the variety spoken by females seven noun classes (see note 2) are distinguished, while in the variety of male speakers just six are distinguished. The contrast between male and masculine classes made by women is lost in men's speech. (The nature of the difference between the male class and the masculine class in the variety spoken by women need not concern us.) This difference shows up in a number of places in the grammar of the two varieties, including in the bound pronouns (see Table 7.2). It also shows up in the gender prefixes to nouns and their modifiers: where the prefix *ki-* is found in the speech of males, either *nya-* (male class) or *ji-* (masculine class) is found in females' speech

Other dimensions of variation

Other social dimensions of social variation include age, ethnicity and religion. Let us look briefly at each of these.

Different generations of speakers often show differences in speech, for instance in use of slang terms (see Question 8, Chapter 4) such as *buck* 'dollar', *wicked* 'good', *cool* 'good, up to date'. Some slang terms (e.g. *buck*) have long lives, and may end up as standard lexemes; *dwindle* is an example: it was a slang term in Shakespeare's time. Many do not survive long, and their use can be characteristic of a particular generation group, the youth of a certain time. This is the case for terms such as *cool* vs. *wicked*, or *sick* for 'good'.

Different ethnic groups in countries such as the USA, Britain and Australia, often speak slightly different varieties of English, showing divergences in phonetics/phonology, lexical items and/or grammar. Perhaps the best-studied ethnic variety is the English of African Americans, sometimes called African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This variety shows characteristics distinguishing it from Standard American English. (a) The auxiliary

be is usually absent where standard English has an unstressed *be*, as for instance in *He fast in everything he do*. (b) The verb *be* is used to indicate habitual activity, as in *He be late*, which means 'he is always late'; *He late* by contrast refers to a single instance. (c) Word-final consonant clusters of Standard English are often absent in AAVE, the cluster being typically replaced by its initial consonant, as in *foun (found)* and *lef (left)*. Although this happens in casual speech in other varieties of English, it is more general in AAVE.

Sometimes religious differences are associated with differences in language varieties. Hindi (spoken in India) and Urdu (spoken in Pakistan) are mutually intelligible varieties of a single language, often referred to as Hindi/Urdu. They differ somewhat in lexicon, and employ different writing systems. But the contrast is based ultimately on religion: Hindi is associated with the Hindu religion, Urdu with Islam.

Accommodation

Speakers often change the way they speak according to the person they are speaking with, adopting features of one another's speech – or what they believe to be characteristics of one another's speech. Thus they adjust the variety they use so as to be more like the variety of their addressee. This is called **speech accommodation**, and is a way of reducing the social distance between the interlocutors. Speakers of any dialect of English who reside for long periods of time in a region where a different dialect is spoken normally accommodate to the dialect of their region of residence; on return to their home region, they reaccommodate to their native dialect. Their speech tends to converge to the dialect spoken around them. I notice this in my own speech when returning to Australia every second year, and then on my subsequent returns to Denmark. When the sociolinguist Peter Trudgill examined his own speech in interviews with Norwich informants, he found that his use of some accent features closely resembled those of the accent of his informants (Trudgill 1986).

Speakers can also choose to emphasize their social distance from an interlocutor by refusing to accommodate, by diverging from the patterns of the other's variety. A person who speaks both a standard and a non-standard dialect of English might shift from speaking the standard to speaking the non-standard in order to signal social distance from their interlocutor, for instance, to underline a refusal to comply with a request.

7.3 Varieties and variation according to use

Where variation in language depends on the more immediate context of the utterance rather than characteristics of the speaker, we speak of different **registers** or **registerial variation**. Registers thus do not construct the speaker's personal identity, but rather their and their addressee's role in that speech interaction. They are linguistic varieties according to use.

According to Michael Halliday (e.g. 1978), three factors are relevant to the specification of registers:

- **Field**, the subject matter of the discourse. For instance, the field of this book is linguistics.
- **Tenor**, the relations among the interactants in the discourse. This includes for example the degree of distance or formality they adopt.
- **Mode**, the medium or channel employed. This can include the choice between speech and writing; it can also include the manner of speaking, for instance, speaking over the telephone rather than in person, and the role of other systems such as gesture.

Different values for these factors (according to Halliday) give rise to different registers or registerial variants.

Examples of different registers in English include legal, bureaucratic, scientific, religious and medical 'Englishes', which are characterized by lexical peculiarities. Differences in the frequencies of use grammatical constructions or categories may also exist: scientific English shows heavy use of nominal modes of expression and nominalizations (nominal stems derived from roots of other parts-of-speech, for example, *variation* from *vary*). The other two factors are also relevant: there will be differences according to the relation between the interactants and whether speech or writing is used. For instance, the register of this book, a written piece, differs from the register I use in lecturing.

Other registers found in some languages include secret varieties, respect varieties, baby-talk and animal talk (speech directed to animals). In what follows we discuss the first two of these.

The notion of **style** overlaps with the notion of register. A style is a variety associated with a particular social context of use, and differs from other styles in degree of formality. Thus styles in a language can be ranged from the most informal and colloquial to the most formal.

Secret varieties

Professional and occupational registers like those mentioned in the previous section serve gate-keeping functions: non-members of the group are excluded from full understanding of the message due to the technical terminology and possibly arcane modes of expression. In some cases this function comes to the fore, and a register's motivation is principally to exclude outsiders and render the meaning obscure. Registers of this type are called 'secret languages' or 'anti-languages'.

An example is the secret register called *kpélémiyé* used by young Kisi men in Liberia. Based on Kisi (Niger-Congo, Sierra Leone), only males of a certain age use it, and no female

speakers or non-Kisi speakers understand it. The words of this secret register are formed from ordinary Kisi words by a variety of somewhat obscure processes of modification, the most obvious of which is reversal of syllables. Examples illustrating the latter process include the secret variety *ndòtúy* 'dog' deriving from the ordinary term *tùjndó*, and *yònáá* 'cat' coming from *jàáyó*. There are also semantic and grammatical differences, including replacement of some items by their opposites, and reordering of words in clauses.

Other examples of secret registers include Pig Latin, sometimes used by school children in Western societies; secret initiands' and ritual varieties of some Australian Aboriginal groups; and secret varieties used by criminals, for example, in West Bengal. A common characteristic of these registers is the replacement of a lexeme by a lexeme opposite or nearly opposite in meaning; this is also quite commonly employed in slangs, as in the use of *wicked* and *sick* for 'good'. Also common is the reversal of the order of syllables.

Respect varieties

Many, perhaps all, languages have means of showing respect, deference, distance and politeness by lexical or grammatical choices. For instance, it is common in the languages of Europe (and elsewhere) for a speaker to address a single hearer with the second person plural pronoun form to indicate respect; in French, for instance, the plural *vous* is used in addressing a single person to show respect, distance or politeness. Japanese and Korean (isolate, Korea) have systems of honorifics, lexical and grammatical choices that mark respect. For instance, in Korean the ordinary word for 'meal' is *pap*; the corresponding honorific is *cinci*. Ordinary verbs in Korean can be made honorific by adding the infix *-si-*, as in *o-si-ta* 'to come', corresponding to ordinary *o-ta* 'to come'.

Traditional Australian Aboriginal societies were egalitarian, and respect was shown not to an individual because of their higher social rank, but rather to particular relatives. In most cases this applies to individuals related as mother-in-law to son-in-law (sometimes brothers-in-law) who should not engage in familiar or intimate interactions with one another, and should be circumspect in their interactions with one another. In many cases special speech varieties are used among interlocutors so related, sometimes also when speaking about the in-law. These varieties were used as a sign of social distance and respect, and are here called **respect varieties** (they are also called avoidance styles and mother-in-law languages).

Respect varieties generally have the phonology and grammar of the everyday language – though there can be divergences – and differ mainly in lexicon. Often the vocabulary of the respect variety is quite small, sometimes covering only a limited range of meanings; the lexemes are typically vague in meaning compared with everyday words. For example, Bunuba and Gooniyandi respect varieties have just over a hundred words. Some respect words have a more general sense than their everyday counterparts, so that one avoidance term corresponds to a few different everyday terms. In the Bunuba variety *jayirriminyi* covers the meanings of the ordinary words *thangani* 'mouth, language, speech, story' and *yingi* 'name', while

jalimanggurru covers three distinct boomerang types, referred to in ordinary speech as *baljarrangi* 'returning boomerang type', *gali* 'returning boomerang type', and *mandi* 'non-returning boomerang type used for hunting'. However, only a fraction of the everyday lexicon has corresponding respect terms: absent are terms for genitals and sexual activity, topics inconsistent with respect and distance!

Generally, an utterance in the respect variety consists of just a single respect lexeme, as illustrated by Gooniyandi example (7-1), which shows the respect verb *malab-* 'make' instead of the ordinary verb *wirrij-* 'dig'.

(7-1)	<i>malab-mi</i>	<i>goorrgoo</i>	Gooniyandi respect variety
	make-he:effected:it	hole	
	'He dug a hole.'		

Some respect varieties apparently have somewhat larger lexicons than the Bunuba and Gooniyandi ones, some fewer. At one extreme is the Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan) respect variety, which apparently had lexemes covering the entire range of semantic domains, though less precisely than the everyday lexemes. At the other extreme are respect varieties with just a single characteristic lexeme, as in the case of Jaru, where it is *luwarn-*, identical with the ordinary verb meaning 'shoot'. This verb replaces every verb of everyday speech, and is completely general in meaning. Respectful utterances are formed in Jaru by replacing the verb by *luwarn-*, as illustrated by (7-2), which may be compared with the near minimal pair in everyday Jaru, (7-3).

(7-2)	<i>maliyi</i>	<i>nga-lu</i>	<i>luwarnan</i>	<i>murla-ngka</i>	Jaru respect variety
	mother:in:law	they:are	be:doing	here-at	
	'Mother-in-law is sitting here.'				

(7-3)	<i>ngawiyi</i>	<i>nga</i>	<i>nyinan</i>	<i>murla-ngka</i>	Everyday Jaru
	father	he:is	be:sitting	here-at	
	'Father is sitting here.'				

Respect varieties often show differences in manner of delivery, being spoken more slowly or softly than normal, and without eye-contact. Use of pronouns is often different: the 'you-plural' form is normally used for a singular addressee, the 'they' form in reference to a single avoidance relative. Furthermore, respect speech is typically vaguer than ordinary speech; it is rare for speakers to elaborate on vague avoidance utterances to make the meaning more precise.

7.4 Language use in bilingual communities

A speech community is not always made up of speakers of just a single language. Many speech communities around the world are constituted of individuals who speak two or more

shared languages. I use the term **bilingualism** to refer to such situations, allowing that more than two languages may be involved; sometimes the term *multilingualism* is used instead as the cover term. Most Aboriginal language speech communities in Australia were traditionally, and still are, bilingual. Almost everyone in the Gooniyandi speech community traditionally spoke, in addition to Gooniyandi, at least one of the following: Bunuba, Kija (Jarrakan), Nyikina (Nyulnyulan, Australia) and Walmajarri; some gifted individuals spoke other languages as well. In more recent times, Kriol (a creole – see §13.4) has been added to the typical inventory. The Danish speech community is also a bilingual one, with English and German among the languages shared by many Danes.

Speakers in bilingual speech communities need to choose between two or more languages on any occasion of speaking. The choice of language is perhaps never entirely random, and like lexical and grammatical choices, usually conveys meaning. We deal first with the most general level of language choice, the level of the speech interaction. Then we look at choices made at the level of utterances, and the ways in which, and reasons why, speakers adopt now one language, now another at different points in the speech interaction. The fundamental idea underlying the discussion is that languages express aspects of speaker's social identity (the 'being' macro-function).

In some cases a speech community uses two distinct forms of one language, one form learnt via education, the other acquired as the first language. The variety learnt at school, the 'high' (H) variety, is usually used in more formal contexts such as in church, on the radio, in serious literature and so on. The other variety, the 'low' (L) variety, is associated with less formal contexts, such as family conversations. This is known as **diglossia**. The German-speaking community in Switzerland is a diglossic speech community. Standard German is the H variety, learnt at school; Swiss German is the L variety, learnt in the home. Comparable situations in which different languages are involved, as in the case of Spanish (H) and Guarani (L) in Paraguay are also referred to as diglossic.

Language choice

In bilingual communities, speakers tend to speak each language in particular interactive contexts, depending on who they are talking to, the topic of conversation and so on. The clusters of contextual factors that influence the habitual choice of language are called **domains**. Examples of domains could include the domestic domain, the educational domain, the administrative domain and so on.

The association between a language and a domain, it should be stressed, is a tendency not a rule: the claim is only that certain choices of language correlate statistically with certain domains. Bilingual speakers can and often do vary their language within a single discourse, or across discourses of the same type (see next section).

It has been proposed that broad patterns of language choice in many African countries correlate with social domains (Myers-Scotton 1993). In urban regions in Kenya many people are trilingual in their own mother tongue, Swahili and English. Mostly they use their mother

tongue in the home, and with members of their own ethnic group. At work again, speakers may use their mother tongue with others in their own ethnic group, and otherwise Swahili or English (especially in white-collar occupations). Outside of the workplace, English and Swahili are also used with people from other ethnic groups, with English associated with more formal and public interactions.

Another trilingual speech community is Sauris, a small community in the Carnian Alps in north-eastern Italy. Here a dialect of German is used in the home; Italian is the language of education and organized religion; and Friulian (a Rhaetian Romance language) is used by men in the local bars.

Code-switching

Code-switching is the phenomenon, common in bilingual speech communities, in which speakers switch from one language to another within the same conversation. Indeed, code-switching often occurs even within the same utterance, as in (7-4) – quite unremarkable in casual conversation – from a bilingual speaker of Malay (Austronesian, Malaysian peninsular and many nearby islands) and English. (Malay words are bolded.)

- (7-4) *This morning I **hantar** my baby tu **dekat** babysitter tu **lah***
 'This morning I took my baby to the babysitter.'

In many bilingual situations the languages in the speaker's repertoires include one or more local or minority languages associated with local ethnic groups, and a majority language that has no such local associations, such as a national language or international language like Swahili and English in Kenya. Broadly speaking, choice of the local language underlines solidarity between the conversational partners, while choice of the national language serves a distancing function, emphasizing the social distance.

By making choices among the available languages within the progress of a conversation, speakers strategically manipulate solidarity and distance to more effectively serve their goals at that point in the interaction. Susan Gal found that bilingual speakers of Hungarian and German in the Austrian village of Oberwart might switch to German in an argument conducted largely in Hungarian to add extra force to a particular point (Gal 1979). It is not that German is always chosen to help win an argument; rather, at certain points in an interaction it can be used in a bid to achieve this communicative purpose; at other points it might be used to achieve different ends.

Code-switching is common in Australian Aboriginal communities today, though only a few careful investigations have been undertaken. One notable example is Patrick McConville's (1985) close study of code-switching in an interactive event in which a small group of men from Daguragu, a small community in the Northern Territory, are butchering a bullock. The men spoke 'standard' Gurindji (Pama-Nyungan), as well as a local regional variety such as Wanyjirra (Pama-Nyungan) and Kriol (see p. 325).

Within this interaction the men constantly switch between using the local variety, standard Gurindji and Kriol. They do not do this at random, however. McConvell shows that the choice depends to a large extent on which social group(s) the speaker wishes to stress membership of at different points in the interaction. Choice of the local variety Wanyjirra highlights the interlocutors' membership of a small local group: using this variety a speaker can declare their social proximity to the addressees, that they are co-members of a small speech community. This might pave the way for a request. By contrast, choice of Kriol would serve to downplay the alliances among the interactants, indicating no more than that they are all members of the large Kriol speech community. Choice of Kriol could reinforce denial of a favour, or stress wider community needs over the needs of an individual. The speaker as it were smooths the way for such problematic speech acts as denials by distancing themselves from the addressee.

This is illustrated by (7-5), a short excerpt of three speech turns of two of the butchers. (Here the vertical line | indicates switch of language; capitals indicate Kriol words; bolding indicates words specific to Standard Eastern Gurindji; small capitals mark specifically Wanyjirra forms; and plain italics indicates forms common to Gurindji and Wanyjirra.)

(7-5)	G:	MINE		PAMPIRLA		THERE AGAIN, OLD MAN		PAMPIRLA,
				shoulder				shoulder
		WAKU NYARRA?		kankurla-pala- <i>nginyi</i>	ngu- <i>yi-n</i>		KUMA-WU	
		which way		above-across-from	will-me-you		cut-will	
J:		laja		-ma	<i>ngartji</i>	ma-ni	W-rlu	
		shoulder		-topic	choose	get-did	W-by	
G:		NGANINGA		-ma				
		my		-topic				
G:	'MINE THE SHOULDER THERE AGAIN, OLD MAN THE SHOULDER, OR WHAT? From across the top you have to for me TO CUT IT.'							
J:	'the shoulder W- picked it out.'							
G:	'MINE (it is).'							

McConvell comments on the code-switching in this interaction as follows:

G begins in Kriol, but switches to Wanyjirra to emphasise the close local bond between himself and J, in relation to J's giving him the shoulder, and the cutting action which will provide G with the shoulder. J however responds by shifting back to the wider community arena by using SEG [Standard Eastern Gurindji], and emphasising the rights of a non-Wanyjirra community member. G reasserts his claim within the narrower arena by using the W [Wanyjirra] term for 'mine'.

(McConvell 1985: 111)

7.5 Language shift and endangerment

Languages do not remain constant for long: indeed they change rapidly. In later chapters we deal with changes that happen over time to the lexicons and grammars of languages. Sociolinguistic patterns are not immune to change either, as societies change and languages are put to new uses. New styles of speech or writing emerge for use in new social interactions and purposes. The wide availability of email, instant messaging, SMS and the World Wide Web has resulted in new patterns of use of many languages.

Nor are things static in the domain of linguistic varieties and their social-identity values. New dialects emerge as populations move into new regions and countries, as happened to English in America, Australia and New Zealand; in some circumstances new languages eventually emerge (see §13.4). Moreover, over time people change their habits of choosing between the languages and varieties at their disposal in the speech community, and thus the social values associated with these varieties change.

When changes in habits of language use become particularly pronounced, and one language or language variety comes to be used in a significantly smaller or wider range of circumstances in a speech community we speak of **language shift**. In extreme cases, what was once the major language of a community – the language used as the primary vehicle of communication and the mother tongue of most community members – may be replaced by another language. When this process affects the entire speech community of a language, we speak of language **endangerment** or **obsolescence**; when it reaches the point where no speakers remain, we refer to **language death**.

Rate of language shift, endangerment and death

The rate at which language shift or death progresses varies considerably from case to case. In some cases of **gradual shift** the domains in which one language is used contract gradually, and it may take many generations before it is replaced by another language (if it ever is). The replacement of Scots Gaelic or Gàidhlig (Indo-European, Scotland) by English has been ongoing for hundreds of years, and remains incomplete.

At the opposite extreme, a language can completely disappear within a generation or less. Such cases of **sudden death** are rare, and are often associated with the death of all speakers within a short period of time. In 1226 the Xixia or Tangut population of Western China, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language, were annihilated by the Mongolian emperor Genghis Khan. But perhaps the clearest example of sudden death is that of Tambora, spoken on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa. All speakers of this language were wiped out in a volcanic eruption in 1815.

Sometimes political circumstances can give rise to sudden death of a language without the death of the entire speech community. Following a massacre of thousands of Indians in El Salvador in 1932, the survivors abandoned their traditional languages so as not to be identified as Indians.

Causes of language shift

Language shift and death can happen for many reasons. Usually it is not possible to isolate a single cause for an instance of language shift; rather, a number of factors typically conspire. The wider social circumstances are also relevant, as none of the factors separately or together guarantees that language shift will occur. Nevertheless, across diverse cases certain factors tend to recur.

Disruption of the speech community – physical or social separation of speakers so that there are fewer opportunities for interaction among them – is a factor in language shift. This can come about in many different ways: decimation of the speech community; enforced resettlement together with others who do not share the language; widespread dispersal of the community for employment and other reasons; influx of significant numbers of immigrants; and separation of children from the adults (e.g. by segregation in dormitories). The Nyulnyul speech community was affected in almost all of these ways during the first 60 or 70 years of contact with Europeans. First, it was significantly reduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through killings by unscrupulous Europeans and diseases they brought with them. With the establishment of the Beagle Bay Mission in Nyulnyul territory in 1890 began influxes of Aborigines from outside, few of whom spoke the language. When dormitories were established on the mission in the early twentieth century, Nyulnyul children were separated from their parents who they saw only on weekends; use of Nyulnyul in the dormitories was forbidden. From the first decades of the twentieth century, many mission educated Aborigines of Nyulnyul descent were sent to employment outside of the mission.

Economic considerations underlie many of the above considerations. Also relevant are numbers of speakers and their patterns of marriage. The larger the speech community of a language, the better chance it will have of survival, other things being equal. But other things are not always equal, and some languages have survived for a long time without large speech communities, while others appear vulnerable even with many thousands of speakers. If marriages tend to be outside of a smallish community of speakers, fragmentation of the community may well result. This consideration was also relevant in the case of Nyulnyul: in the early decades of the twentieth century missionaries strongly encouraged marriage between local Nyulnyul men and women from outside, the majority of whom had been forcibly taken to the mission as young children.

Attitudes to the languages can also be decisive. Speakers might shift their speech habits in favour of a language enjoying higher status, especially if it is politically advantageous to do so. Attitudes can be relevant in other ways as well. In some Australian Aboriginal communities the traditional languages have come to be regarded by speakers as too difficult for children,

and suitable only for adults. And in some cases last speakers have withheld their language from younger generations because they fear it will not be adequately valued.

The symbolic value of a language can also have a bearing. In some instances the language of the colonizers is associated with the modern world and desirable commodities, while the traditional language might be associated with old ways of life no longer practised. An association with traditional culture can, on the other hand, sometimes be an advantage, giving the language at least one domain in which its survival is enhanced. The Nyulnyul situation is interesting in this regard: as a result of missionary translations of religious materials, it seems that the association between Nyulnyul and traditional cultural practices was weakened, so that no longer was the language identified with traditional practices. As a result, Nyulnyul was left with no positive symbolic value.

Structural changes accompanying language shift and endangerment

In language endangerment situations, especially when shift is gradual, simplifications of grammar and lexicon often occur. For instance, the Gurindji of 5–8-year-old children in the Daguragu and Kalkaringi communities in the Northern Territory shows evidence of simplification in various grammatical features, and loss of infrequent words.³ Bound pronouns have been lost entirely, and the allomorphy of some case suffixes has been reduced, as can be seen from the two case inflections presented in Table 7.3. (For explanation of the term ergative see §11.3.)

As mentioned in §3.3, Nyulnyul has a set of some fifty bound nouns indicating parts of the body that require a prefix indicating the owner of the part. By the last decades of the twentieth century, only one speaker used this system. The others (most of whom did not speak the language fluently) used the third person singular form of the noun as the root form; the system of prefixes had been lost entirely, and possession was indicated by a possessive pronoun. Thus whereas in traditional Nyulnyul one would say *nga-marl* ‘my hand’, in modern speech ‘my hand’ is expressed as *jan nimarl*, literally ‘my his-hand’.

Table 7.3 Some allomorphs of two case suffixes in Gurindji (after Dalton et al. 1995)

Cases	Children's Gurindji	Traditional Gurindji
ergative	-ngku after a vowel	-ngku after a vowel in words of two syllables
	-tu after a consonant	-lu after a vowel in words of more than two syllables -tu after an alveolar consonant
locative	-ngka after a vowel	-ju after a palatal consonant and others
	-ta after a consonant	-la after a vowel in words of two syllables -ta after an alveolar consonant -ja after a palatal consonant and others

Intriguingly, this system of pronoun prefixes to nouns was not entirely absent from late-twentieth-century Nyulnyul. Some speakers retained it on the one or two exceptional prefixing nouns that do not denote body parts. Thus it was retained in the speech of some on *-mungk* 'belief, knowledge' as in *nyi-mungk* 'your belief/knowledge' and *nga-mungk* 'my belief/knowledge'. One guesses that preservation of the feature for this lexical item may have been supported by the fact that *-mungk* expresses a meaning closer to that of a verb rather than a noun; note, however, it was not actually reanalysed as a verb, and given verbal inflections.

With decreasing use of a language in specialized social domains and disappearance of social domains such as ritual, registers can be lost, and along with them lexical items peculiar to them. For instance, in the late twentieth century speakers of Nyulnyul appear to have known few terms for secret-sacred law and ritual objects. These words almost certainly disappeared with the generation who were adolescents in the 1890s: this was the last generation to undergo initiation, a prerequisite to acquisition of sacred religious knowledge.

Language maintenance and revival

Language endangerment and death have always occurred; however, the rate at which languages are becoming endangered and dying has been steadily accelerating over the past few centuries. Many languages of Australia and the Americas have become seriously endangered in post-colonial times. In Australia, for example, no more than 20 traditional languages are presently being learnt as a mother tongue of children, or have a thousand or more speakers. This represents less than a tenth of the number of languages that were spoken by viable populations of speakers on the continent at first colonization in 1788, although many even then perhaps had fewer than 1,000 speakers.

Some linguists have predicted that if present trends continue unabated as many as 90 per cent of the presently spoken languages will either become extinct, or at least endangered, within the next century. Opinions differ, however, and it is a fact that linguists' prognoses have often been wide off the mark (Vakhtin 2002).

Many speakers of endangered languages and many linguists are concerned about this situation, and efforts have been proposed or adopted to arrest the processes of shift in communities around the globe. These efforts are referred to by a range of terms, including language **maintenance** and **revival** (other terms are also used; sometimes the terms are used to refer to different things, sometimes as synonyms). For instance, in Australia a number of Aboriginal-controlled language centres have emerged since the mid-1980s, that are concerned with determining community attitudes to the traditional languages, and how best to serve them. In a number of cases communities have expressed determination that their traditional languages survive, or that a previously spoken traditional language be reintroduced. Slightly earlier, in New Zealand, 'language nests' or *kohunga reo*, were established by the Maori

community in an attempt to promote the acquisition of Maori by children. In these language nests older Maori-speaking adults, typically from the generation grandparental to the children, worked as voluntary caretakers speaking Maori to the children. (This strategy has subsequently been tried elsewhere.)

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine which strategies are likely to succeed either in general or in particular cases, and few attempts have enjoyed much success. Widely regarded as the most successful is the revival of Hebrew – which had not been used as a medium of everyday communication for over a thousand years – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (See, however, Zuckermann (2006) for a different view.)

Summing up

Any language with a viable **speech community** is heterogeneous, showing varieties and variation in phonetics, phonology, lexicon and/or grammar associated with differences among speakers along social dimensions.

Languages are often divided into different **dialects** and **accents** according to region. They also show **dialectal variation** across regions, which sometimes cuts across dialects. Dialectal variation is represented by **isoglosses** on a map. Other social dimensions that language variation and varieties may be associated with include social class, age, gender, ethnicity and religion. The linguistic variant spoken by a speaker serves as a badge of group membership. Speakers tend to **accommodate** to the variety of their interlocutor, reinforcing social ties with them.

Languages also vary according to the use speakers put them, different forms of speech being associated with different functions of language in interaction. This gives us **registers** and **registerial variation**, which include legalese, secret languages, respect varieties and the like. **Styles** are similar to registers, but the term is usually used for varieties differing in terms of formality.

Many speech communities are **bilingual**. In such communities the choice of language can express a speaker's social identity. In many bilingual communities language choice is at least partly motivated by **domain**; but domains do not usually determine the language spoken. In most bilingual communities **code-switching** occurs, often to strategically manipulate feelings of solidarity and distance.

Speech communities change over time, sometimes radically: their language repertoire may change with the introduction of a new language, as may the habits of using them. **Language shift** happens when a language comes to be spoken in fewer domains, in a more restricted range of social circumstances. In extreme cases, a language can become **endangered** or **obsolete**; ultimately we may have language **death** or **extinction**. These processes happen at vastly different rates. Language endangerment is often (though not always) accompanied by changes, usually simplifications, in the grammar and lexicon of the language.

There is currently considerable concern amongst linguists and others, including speakers of endangered languages, about the loss of the world's linguistic diversity; this has led to the development of language maintenance efforts in various countries.

Guide to further reading

Two of the best textbooks on sociolinguistics are Mesthrie et al. (2000) and Coulmas (2005). Also worth reading are Holmes (1992) and Coulmas (2001); for a rather different approach, see Halliday (1978). One type of sociolinguistic investigation we did not mention, the ethnography of communication, is concerned with how language is used in different cultures; Saville-Troike (1989) provides an excellent textbook introduction.

On use of corpus studies to identify registers according to statistical patterns in distributions of lexical items see Biber (1995) and Biber et al. (1998). Chapter 5 of Mithun (1999) deals with various speech registers in North American languages (though not under the term register); for fuller treatment, Silver and Miller (1997) is recommended.

There is a large literature on gender differences in language and language use in English and other languages; see Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003) for an excellent collection of articles. Finlayson (1995) discusses 'women's language of respect' in Xhosa (Niger-Congo, South Africa); Bradley (1988) deals with grammatical and lexical differences between men's and women's varieties in Yanyuwa.

Books dealing with social aspects of bilingualism and multilingualism include Myers-Scotton (1993) and Romaine (1995); see also Romaine (2001).

A short overview of language shift and endangerment can be found in Chapter 8 of Mesthrie et al. (2000). For fuller treatments see Grenoble and Whaley (1998) and Tsunoda (2005); Grenoble and Whaley (2006) deals with language maintenance and revitalization. McGregor (2003) provides fuller details on the language situation of Nyulnyul. Abley (2003) presents a non-technical and very readable travelogue of his journeys searching for endangered languages. However, be warned that Abley adopts an extreme Whorfian stance (see §8.1), and shows considerable linguistic naivety.



Issues for further thought and exercises

- Below are some words characteristic of different major dialects of English, including British, American, Australian and New Zealand. Identify which dialect(s) each belongs to. (Columns do not show dialects.)

a. faucet	tap
b. dyke	toilet
c. truck	lorry
d. g'day	hi
e. gas	petrol
f. drugstore	chemist
g. diaper	nappy

- Which dialects do you think the following pronunciations represent?

- a. [fɪʃ] 'fish'
- b. [mɔːnɪŋ] 'morning'
- c. [səi] 'see'

- d. [tʃips] 'chips'
e. [næʊ] 'now'
- List as many gender differences as you can in English or another language you speak. Classify the differences according to whether they are phonetic, phonological, intonational, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic or interactive (i.e. differences in the organization of speech interaction).
 - In one of his investigations Labov was interested in post-vocalic *r* as a sociolinguistic variable: in New York English it is a prestige feature. He visited three department stores in New York and asked the attendant a question that would elicit the answer *fourth floor*; for example, he might have asked *Excuse me, where are women's shoes?* Both words *fourth* and *floor* could of course be pronounced with or without the rhotic following the vowel. The three department stores varied from lower to higher prices, which he expected would correlate with the socio-economic status of the clientele. Labov pretended he did not hear the answer, and asked for a repetition. He found that there were more instances of post-vocalic *r* in *floor* than *fourth*. Why would this be? He also found more instances of post-vocalic *r* in the speech of attendants in the more expensive stores, and a higher frequency of this variable on the repetition. Labov interprets this as indicative of differences in the frequency of post-vocalic *r* across the social varieties of New York speech. Given that the attendants in all of the stores would presumably be working class, how would you account his conclusions?
 - Compile a list of lexical items characteristic of some professional register (such as education, law, music, medicine). Give an explanation of each term in informal style. Do you think that use of informal style rather than the professional register would be helpful in making professional writing in these domains more accessible to the layman? Do you think that the professional register could be entirely replaced by an informal style: or to put things another way, is the only function of professional registers to exclude non-members of the profession? Explain your reasons.
 - What linguistic features (such as modes of delivery (i.e. in terms of the phonetic properties of delivery of the message), lexicon and grammar) do you think would characterize the difference between the registers of spoken science and sports commentary? Listen to an example of each on television, and test your expectations. Be alert also for other differences than those you expected.
 - Below are examples of words in a Pig Latin variety of French called Verlan. Explain the way Verlan words are formed from the corresponding French words.

French	Verlan	English
a. <i>blouson</i> /bluzõ/	<i>zomblou</i>	'jacket'
b. <i>bloquer</i> /bløkɛʁ/	<i>québlo</i>	'to block'
c. <i>père</i> /pe:ʁ/	<i>reupé</i>	'father'
d. <i>zonard</i> /zona:ʁ/	<i>narzo</i>	'person who lives in a suburb of Paris'
e. <i>jeter</i> /ʒ(ə)tɛ/	<i>téjé</i>	'to throw'
f. <i>cresson</i> /kʁesõ/	<i>soncré</i>	'watercress'
g. <i>démon</i> /demõ/	<i>mondé</i>	'demon'

- Discuss the different opinions on language death embodied in the following two quotes:

- a. The last fluent speaker of Damin [a secret language spoken by initiated men among the Lardil of Mornington Island, North Queensland] passed away several years ago. The destruction of this intellectual treasure was carried out, for the most part, by people who were not aware of its existence, coming as they did from a culture in which wealth is physical and visible. Damin was not visible for them, and as far as they were concerned, the Lardil people had no wealth, apart from land. (Hale et al. 1992: 40)

(Continued)

Issues for further thought and exercises—Cont'd

- b. As a linguist I am of course saddened by the vast amount of linguistic and cultural knowledge that is disappearing, and I am delighted that the National Science Foundation has sponsored our UCLA research, in which we try to record for posterity the phonetic structures of some of the languages that will not be around for much longer. But it is not for me to assess the virtues of programmes for language preservation versus those of competitive programmes for tuberculosis eradication, which may also need government funds . . .

Last summer I was working on Dahalo, a rapidly dying Cushitic language, spoken by a few hundred people in a rural district of Kenya. I asked one of our consultants whether his teenaged sons spoke Dahalo. 'No', he said. 'They can still hear it, but cannot speak it. They speak only Swahili.' he was smiling when he said it, and did not seem to regret it. He was proud that his sons had been to school and knew things that he did not. Who am I to say that he was wrong? (Ladefoged 1992: 810–811)

Notes

1. The *stød*, or creaky voice, is an effect produced by slow and irregular vibrations of just one end of the vocal cords; it sounds a bit like the noise of a door swinging on unoiled hinges. The Danish *stød* is a prosodic feature associated with certain syllables.
2. Genders or noun classes are systems in which the nouns of a language are divided into different groups according to the forms taken by syntactically related items such as demonstratives and adjectives in the NP. For example, standard Danish distinguishes two genders (sometimes called common and neuter) that are indicated by the form of articles, determiners and adjectives. Thus the article *en* 'a' goes with nouns such as *mand* 'man', *kvinde* 'woman', *øl* 'beer', indicating that these nouns are of the common gender; by contrast the article *et* 'a' goes with nouns like *land* 'country', *hæfte* 'notebook' and *tog* 'train'.
3. More recently, it has been argued that the variety now spoken by children at Daguragu and Kalkaringi is a new language variety, a mixed language (see §13.4) involving components of Gurindji and Kriol, rather than a simplified form of Gurindji (Meakins and O'Shannessy 2004).