Article 1: DIALECT AND LANGUAGE

Adapted from Chapter 1 of Dialectology by Chambers and Trudgill.

What exactly is a dialect? In common usage, of course, the word ‘dialect’ means a form of language that is low status, often from the country or small towns, and usually associated with farmers or workers. ‘Dialect’ is also often used to mean forms of language that have no written form. And dialects are also often thought of as being incorrect forms that are deviations from the standard form of a language. In this book, we shall not be adopting any of these points of view. We will, on the contrary, accept the idea that all speakers are speakers of at least one dialect – that standard English, for example, is just as much a dialect as any other form of English – and that there is no reason to think that any one dialect is in any way linguistically better than any other.

MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY

It is very often useful to regard dialects as ‘dialects of a language’. Dialects, that is, can be thought of as different kinds or varieties of a particular language. In this way we may talk of the Parisian dialect of French, the Shanghai dialect of Chinese, the Bavarian dialect of German, and so on. This distinction, however, presents us with a number of difficulties. In particular, we are faced with the problem of how we can distinguish between a language and a dialect, and the related problem of how we can decide what a language is. One option is to say that a language is a group of mutually intelligible dialects. This definition is useful because it looks at dialects as parts of a language, and it provides a way to distinguishing between one language and another.

This description of ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, however, is not entirely successful, and it is easy to think of two types of example that proves it wrong. If we consider the Scandinavian languages, we see that Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are usually considered to be different languages. Unfortunately, though, they are mutually intelligible. Speakers of these three languages can easily understand each other and communicate together. Another example is German. While we would normally consider German to be a single language, there are some types of German which cannot be understood by speakers of other types of German. Our definition, therefore, would say that Danish is just a dialect, and there are several different German languages.

There are also other difficulties with the idea of mutual intelligibility. The main problem is that intelligibility is not a clear yes-or-no question. While it is true, for example, that many Swedish people can understand many Norwegian people, it is also clear that it is easier for them to understand other Swedish people. For this reason, their mutual intelligibility can be less than perfect, and the speakers have to adjust for this. They may speak more slowly, and avoid certain words and pronunciations that they think may be difficult. So the question cannot be simply “Are these two varieties mutually intelligible?” It must be “How much mutual intelligibility is there?” and then we have to decide how much mutual intelligibility is required for the varieties to be considered the same language.

Mutual intelligibility may also not be equal in both directions. It is often said, for instance, that Danish people understand Norwegians better than Norwegians understand the Danish. Mutual intelligibility will also depend on other factors such as how much each person has been exposed to the other language, their degree of education and how much they really want to understand.
Sometimes it seems people do not understand because they do not want to. A study carried out in Africa, for example, demonstrated that, while one ethnic group A claimed to be able to understand the language of another ethnic group B, ethnic group B claimed not to be able to understand language A. It then emerged that group A, a larger and more powerful group, wanted to incorporate group B’s land into their own, and they used the argument that they were really the same people and spoke the same language. Clearly, group B’s failure to comprehend group A’s language was a way to resist having their land taken.

LANGUAGE, DIALECT, AND ACCENT

It seems, then, that while the idea of mutual intelligibility may be somewhat useful, it is not enough to decide what is and is not a language. In fact, our discussion of the Scandinavian languages and German suggests that a ‘language’ is not a particularly linguistic idea at all. Linguistic features are obviously part of it, but it is clear that we consider Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and German to be single languages for political, geographical, historical, sociological and cultural reasons in addition to linguistic reasons. Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish have distinct, standardised forms, with their own way of writing, grammar books, and literatures; they are spoken in three separate countries; and their speakers think that they speak different languages. The term ‘language’, then, is not a very clear or technical term. Another term that is perhaps more useful is a language ‘variety’. We shall use ‘variety’ as a mean any particular kind of language which we want to consider as different from other kinds. The term can be very specific or more general. We can, for example, talk about the variety ‘American English’, but we can also talk about ‘southern American English’ as a variety, or ‘African American English’ – and so on. More particular terms will be ‘accent’ and ‘dialect’. Accent is the way in which a speaker pronounces his or her language, and therefore is a variety which is phonetically and/or phonologically different from other varieties. Dialect, on the other hand, refers to varieties which are different in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. If two speakers say I done it last night and I did it last night, we can say that they are speaking different dialects.

GEOGRAPHICAL DIALECT CONTINUA

There are many parts of the world where, if we examine dialects spoken by people in rural areas, we find the following type of situation. If we travel from village to village, in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences which distinguish one village from another. Sometimes these differences will be larger, sometimes smaller, but they will add up. The further we get from our starting point, the larger the differences will become. The effect of this may therefore be, if the distance involved is large enough, that while speakers from village A understand people from village B very well and those from village F quite well, it may be difficult for them to understand people from village M, and they may not understand people in village Z at all. Village M, on the other hand, will probably understand village F quite well, and villages A and Z only with difficulty. In other words, dialects on the outer edges of the geographical area may not be mutually intelligible, but they will be linked by a chain of mutual intelligibility. There is never a clear division or break between neighboring dialects, but the linguistic differences will add up so that the greater the geographical separation, the harder it is to understand.

This type of situation is known as a geographical dialect continuum. There are many such continua. In Europe, for example, the standard varieties of French, Italian, Catalan, Spanish and Portuguese are not really mutually intelligible. The rural dialects of these languages, however, form part of the West Romance dialect continuum, which goes from the coast of Portugal to the centre of Belgium, and from there to the south of Italy. National borders are not a problem; for example, people on the east side of Portugal have no problem understanding people on the west side of Spain. The West Germanic continuum includes all dialects of what we call German, Dutch and Flemish. The Scandinavian dialect continuum includes dialects of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. The North Slavic dialect continuum includes Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and Slovak, and the South Slavic continuum includes Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian.
The idea of the dialect continuum is perhaps a little difficult to understand, because we are used to thinking of languages as being completely different from each other. But the fact that such continua exist shows why we need to use terms like ‘variety’. From a linguistic point of view, the way we divide and label particular parts of a continuum may often be arbitrary.

In some cases, where countries are still arguing about their national borders, dialect continua can cause political difficulties, precisely because people are used to thinking of discrete languages rather than of ‘varieties’ or continua. The South Slavic dialect continuum, as we have seen, incorporates the standard languages, Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian. Dividing the languages like this, though, hides some problems about politics and independence. For example, until recently, the languages that are now called Serbian and Croatian were thought of as a single language in the country of Yugoslavia. Since the break-up of that country, however, many politicians have wanted to emphasize their separateness. The government of Bosnia has argued that there is a third language called Bosnian that is distinct from Serbian and Croatian. From a linguistic point of view, however, there is no right answer to these arguments, because there is no clear division between varieties on a dialect continuum.

SOCIAL DIALECT CONTINUA

In addition to geographical dialect continua, we can also have a social dialect continuum, and this kind of continuum can also pose problems. The situation of Jamaica is a good example. The linguistic history of Jamaica is very complex. One interpretation of what happened is that the people at the top of society (the British) spoke English, while the people at the bottom of society (the African slaves) spoke Jamaican Creole. Jamaican Creole was historically related to English but very different from it. Over the centuries, however, English had a lot of influence on Jamaican Creole. Two results have happened. First, even the ‘deepest’ Creole is now much closer to English than it was before. Second, the gap between English and Jamaican Creole has been filled in. The result is that, while people at the top of society speak clear English, and those at the bottom of society speak something which clearly is not English, the people in the middle of society speak something in between English and Creole. The varieties between ‘pure’ English and ‘deep’ Creole form a social dialect continuum. Most speakers can use a wide range of the continuum and ‘slide’ up and down it depending on the stylistic context.

The problem with the Jamaican social dialect continuum is that there is no real way to divide English from Jamaican Creole. In Norway and Sweden, the dialects can be understood, but the borders of the two countries provide a dividing line. In Jamaica, there is no reason to say that ‘English stops here’ or ‘Jamaican Creole starts here’. The result is that all Jamaicans are considered to speak English. In fact, some Jamaicans do speak English, some speak Jamaican Creole, and some speak varieties that are not really English or Creole. Again this is a difficult idea to understand, since we are used to thinking of languages as being well-defined and clearly separated: either it is English or it is not. The facts, however, are often different. The most obvious problem in the Jamaican situation is educational. Jamaican children are considered to be speakers of English, and this is therefore the language which they are taught to read and write and the language they must use in exams. Educators have only recently begun to realise, however, that the educational failure of some Jamaican children may be due to a failure by educational authorities to recognise this language problem for what it is.

AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

A useful concept in looking at the relationship between the notions of a ‘language’ and ‘dialect continuum’ is the concept of heteronomy. Heteronomy is the opposite of autonomy or independence. It means that instead of having its own authority and independence, a language is under the authority of another variety of language. For example, we say that some varieties on the West Germanic dialect continuum are dialects of Dutch while others are dialects of German because of the relationship these dialects bear to the respective standard languages. The Dutch dialects are
under the ‘authority’ of standard Dutch, and the German dialects under the ‘authority’ of standard German. The effect of this is that speakers of the Dutch dialects believe that they are speaking Dutch, that they read and write in Dutch, and that any standardising changes in their dialects will be towards Dutch. In general, they look to Dutch as the standard language which naturally corresponds to their local varieties.

Since heteronomy is the result of political and cultural factors rather than purely linguistic factors, it can change. A useful example of this is the history of what is now southern Sweden. Until 1658 this area was part of Denmark, and the dialects spoken there were considered to be dialects of Danish. As the result of war, however, the territory became part of Sweden, and in only forty years or so, those same dialects were considered dialects of Swedish. The dialects had not changed at all linguistically, but they had become heteronomous with respect to standard Swedish rather than Danish.

We can now continue our earlier discussion of the term ‘language’. Normally, it seems, we use this term for an autonomous (independent) variety together with all the varieties which are dependent (heteronomous) on it. And just as the direction of heteronomy can change (e.g., Danish to Swedish), so also varieties that were dependent can become independent, often as the result of political developments, and ‘new’ languages can develop. The linguistic forms will not be new, of course, they will simply be labelled an independent language. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, for instance, the standard language used in Norway was actually Danish, and it was only when Norway became an independent nation that a standard Norwegian language was developed.

In other cases, political separation may lead not to linguistic independence but to partial independence or to a kind of double or shared independence. North American English, for example, used to consider British English as its standard, but now British, American and Canadian English are all regarded as equally legitimate. This has not happened in the case of Canadian French, which still considers European French as the standard. And Jamaican Creole is still significantly dependent on standard English. It has been said that ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy’. There is some truth in this claim, which emphasizes the political factors that affect linguistic autonomy. Nevertheless, the Jamaican situation shows that it is not the whole truth. Perhaps in the future Jamaican Creole will achieve complete independence, like Norwegian, or shared independence, like American English. Certainly there are educational reasons for suggesting that such a development in Jamaica would be good.

It is also possible for autonomy to be lost, and for formerly independent varieties to become heteronomous with respect to other varieties. This is what has happened to those varieties of English spoken in Scotland. Scots was formerly an independent variety, but for the last two hundred years has been regarded as a variety of English for the last two hundred years or so. With the recent rise of Scottish nationalism, however, people are trying to make Scottish English/Scots an independent linguistic variety again, and it is possible that some form of Scots will achieve at least partial autonomy in the near future.

KEY TERMS

dialect -- (n) a variety of a language that is different from other varieties in its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation

mutually intelligible -- (adj) can understand each other

variety -- (n) a kind of language that is different from other kinds; can be used to refer to different languages, or just different dialects or styles

accent -- (n) the way a speaker pronounces his or her language

geographical dialect continuum -- (n) a situation where there is gradual change in language as you move across the land

social dialect continuum -- (n) a situation where there is gradual change in language across different social classes in the same place

heteronomy -- (n) being dependent on another language variety for identity and authority

autonomy -- (n) being independent of other varieties of language
LANGUAGES
French
Chinese
German
Norwegian
Swedish
Danish
Italian
Catalan
Spanish
Portuguese
Flemish
Russian
Ukrainian
Polish
Czech
Slovak
Slovenian
Serbian
Croatian
Macedonian
Bulgarian
Jamaican Creole

QUESTIONS
• Why is mutual intelligibility not sufficient as a definition of language?
• Why do geographical continua make it difficult to define a language?
• How are social dialect continua different from geographical dialect continua?
• How can the ideas of autonomy and heteronomy help define the idea of a language?
• What political and social factors can influence how people define their languages?
INTRODUCTION: THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIFORMITY

Many widely used languages, such as English, French and Spanish, are regarded as each possessing a standard variety, and this affects the manner in which speakers think about their own language and about language in general. We may say that speakers of such widely used languages, unlike speakers of some less well known languages, live in standard language cultures. In such cultures, language attitudes are dominated by powerful ideological positions that are largely based on the supposed existence of this standard form, and these positions can be called the standard language ideology or ‘ideology of the standard language’. Speakers are not usually conscious that they are conditioned by these ideological positions: they usually believe their attitudes about language to be common sense and assume that virtually everyone agrees with them. We shall discuss this further below: first, we need an outline of the process that is involved in the standardization of a language.

Standardization applies to many things besides language: it applies to weights and measures, for example, and to many kinds of object, such as electrical plugs and fittings and other objects made in factories. In these instances it is desirable that the exact value of each measure should be agreed among users, and that each relevant object should be exactly the same as all the others of its kind. Thus, as a process, standardization consists of the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects, and so the most important structural property of a standard variety of a language is uniformity. This means – ideally – that every sound should be pronounced in the same way by every speaker, and that all speakers should use the same grammatical forms and vocabulary items in exactly the same way. (It also implies that the language should not undergo change.) In principle, therefore, when there are two or more variants of some linguistic form, only one of them is admitted into a standard variety. For example, although the expressions you were and you was are both used in English, only one of them is considered to be the standard form. To fulfill the requirements of standardization alone it would not matter which of these variants were the one accepted: standardization merely requires that one, and only one, of them should be accepted. In practice, however, the choice of one over the other is affected by factors outside the standardization process itself, and these factors, taken together, are what constitute the standard ideology.

The ideal of absolute uniformity is never achieved in practice. Although language standardization discourages variability, no language is ever completely invariant. In written language, uniform practice is quite close to being achieved – particularly in printed usage – but spoken language is not as easy to standardize. The pronunciation of English, for example, varies tremendously in the geographical and social dimensions, and it can change quite rapidly. A standard language, therefore, is an idealization – an idea in the mind rather than a fully achieved reality. The varieties that we call Standard English, Standard French, etc., are not in fact completely invariant or totally immune to change.

The ideal of the standard always requires active maintenance, and to the extent that various factors (such as the educational system) contribute to maintenance, the presence of a standard variety may slow down the process of language change. The availability of a standard variety is in fact very useful in human activities, just as standardized weights and measures are so obviously useful. Standard varieties are comprehensible much more widely than localized dialects are. Furthermore, elaboration of function is one of the characteristics of a standard language: it can be used in a wide variety of different spheres of activity. Indeed, elaboration of function can be seen as one of the driving forces that encourage standardization. As the language becomes used in a greater and greater variety of functions, it becomes more and more important that a near-uniform variety should be available to fulfill all these functions. Just as the proliferation of varying coinages or weights and
measures is dysfunctional, so a proliferation of different forms of the language would be highly undesirable in a society that requires widespread communications.

In history, the standardization of weights and measures over time went hand in hand with the rise of capitalism and expansion of large-scale commercial activity, and something similar seems to have happened in language standardization. Older varieties of language were highly divergent and variable. Although linguistic uniformity is particularly desirable in the case of legal, commercial and official written documents, the progress of standardization over the centuries has been broadly parallel to economic and technological progress. One of the consequences of the movement towards uniformity has been the spread of the standard ideology among speakers. We now turn to this, with attention to a number of interrelated and overlapping characteristics – the notion of correctness, the importance of authority, the relevance of prestige, and the idea of legitimacy.

CORRECTNESS AND AUTHORITY

An important consequence of language standardization has been the development of consciousness among speakers of a ‘correct’ form of language. In standard-language cultures, virtually everyone subscribes to the idea of correctness. Some forms are believed to be right and others wrong, and this is generally taken for granted as common sense. Although rules of correctness are actually superimposed upon the language from outside, they are considered by speakers to be rules inherent in the language itself. In this view, the utterance *I seen it*, for example, is obviously wrong, and *I saw it* is obviously correct. For the vast majority of people in a standard language culture, including very highly intelligent and educated people, this is just how it is. Correctness rules are thought to be rules of language (not of society), and no justification is needed for rejecting *I seen it*. Sometimes a justification is given, e.g. that *seen* is the participle, not the past tense, but when this happens it is a rationalization after the fact. There is no rule inherent in language that says *seen* must only be the past participle and cannot be a past tense form. The ‘correctness’ of *I saw it* depends solely on the fact that it has become the standard form of the past tense. In purely linguistic terms, the choice of one usage over another is entirely arbitrary. That is, if the standard variety had preferred *seen*, *I seen it* would be considered correct.

This arbitrariness is clearest in rules of spelling. Spelling is the most successfully standardized level of language, and variation in spelling is not normally tolerated. The spelling *sope*, for example, is considered wrong and the spelling *soap* right. Yet there is no reason why it should not be the other way around. In the eighteenth century, Dr Samuel Johnson’s dictionary accepted both spellings, and also both spellings *choak* and *choke*. In a standard language culture, however, the choice is not considered arbitrary. It is believed to be a linguistic fact that one is right and the other wrong. Everybody should know this. It is part of general knowledge to know it, and in a standard language culture it is your own fault if you cannot spell or if you speak incorrectly. It is believed that everyone should be able to learn what the correct forms are; therefore, it is thought to be quite proper to discriminate – in employment, for example – against people who use non-standard forms. Although it is now unacceptable to discriminate openly against someone because of their ethnic group, social class, religion or gender, it is still acceptable to discriminate on linguistic grounds. Unfortunately, people do not usually realize that language is connected to these other social categories. As a person who uses non-standard linguistic forms will often be from a minority ethnic group or a lower social class, the effect of language discrimination is to discriminate against ethnic minorities and lower social class groups.

The belief in correctness is an extremely important factor in the maintenance of a standard language, or, more precisely, maintenance of the consciousness of a standard, and this belief leads to a popular view that is directly contrary to what most linguistic theorists teach. Theorists generally teach that language is the possession of every native speaker – that it is primarily an internal development within the speaker’s mind, and it is therefore essentially a cognitive phenomenon. In a standard language culture, however, a language is basically the possession of only a few people who have the authority to make everyone else follow the rules of the language. This ideological position is already clear in the work of the writer Jonathan Swift, who believed that a group of people should...
be appointed to make the English language a permanent uniform structure so that it would never change: ‘what I have most at heart is, that some Method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever [. . .] For I am of Opinion, that it is better a language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing.’ Swift’s assumptions are based on the view that language is a cultural phenomenon that comes from social affairs rather than an outgrowth of an individual’s cognitive faculties. This is the popular view in any standard-language culture. From this point of view, language is similar to cultural products such as art, law and religion, and people feel that it has an overarching presence outside the speaker and his/her immediate surroundings. For all these reasons, it makes sense in such a culture to pass judgement on good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly in language.

The educational system becomes a crucial factor in spreading the knowledge of the standard language. Indeed, people find it reasonable to say that children go to school to ‘learn English’, when in fact in their early childhood they have already learned basic spoken English grammar and phonology naturally and without specific instruction. At school the child learns to read and write in the standard language. Thus, children are believed to be taught their native language at school, and of course it is knowledge of the standard written form that children learn there. It is characteristic of the standard ideology for people to believe that this uniform standard variety with all its rules of correctness is actually the language itself.

The maintenance of a standard language clearly depends on obedience to authority. For this purpose it is desirable that the standard language should be codified. Standard English, unlike most other varieties of English, has been codified over the centuries in the form of dictionaries, grammar books, pronunciation guides and manuals of usage, and these are routinely consulted as authorities on correctness. Although many of the handbooks on usage can be useful, particularly for writers of English, some of them (often glorying in titles such as Improve your English!) are ill informed, and their authors may even boast that they are scientists or engineers who are not qualified as linguistic experts. They often encourage usages that are out of date and condemn usages that are normal spoken English, such as ‘It’s me’ and ‘Who do you think you’re talking to?’ In some countries, this highest authority is established in a national academy, such as the Académie Française, which may even have some legislative power. Such authorities commonly make pronouncements as to what is acceptable in the language, but they are most well-known for condemning new usages that have entered the language, particularly words that are borrowed from another language. Thus, they are concerned not only with maintaining uniformity, but also with keeping the language ‘pure’.

PRESTIGE
A number of factors are involved in selecting which forms will be used in the standard variety. One factor is authority; another is prestige, to which we now turn. Most people will consider that one of the following sentences is in some sense ‘better’ than the other:

1. He was a man what didn’t believe nothing.
2. He was a man who didn’t believe anything.

It may be said that (2) has higher prestige than (1). It may further be claimed that the (standard) ‘dialect’ of (2) has higher prestige than the (non-standard) dialect of (1). It should be noted, however, that prestige is not primarily a property of a linguistic form or variety – it is a property of speakers, or groups of speakers, some of whom are accorded higher social prestige than others, and this is very clearly related to varying social class or social status. Thus, prestige is conferred on language varieties by speakers, and speakers tend to confer prestige on usages that are considered to be those of the higher social classes. At this point we also become involved with authority: some social groups have more authority than others. What is clear is that the selection process is highly sensitive to social and socio-political factors.

The opposite of prestige is stigma. Linguistic forms that are favoured by the lower social classes tend to be stigmatized in the wider community, and these are typically the forms that are
rejected in the educational system. Indeed, sometimes urban dialects are so heavily stigmatized that it is even claimed that their speakers do not know ‘their own language’. The following comments by a school inspector in 1925 are an extreme example of the effects and workings of the standard ideology:

Come into a London elementary school and . . . you will notice that the boys and girls are almost inarticulate. They can make noises, but they cannot speak . . . listen to them as they ‘play at schools’; you can barely recognise your native language.

However, prestige is a difficult concept to define, as individuals may differ in assigning prestige to particular groups and hence to particular uses of language. In particular, it is not necessarily true that the dialect of the very highest social group is the main contributor to a standard variety. On the contrary, research strongly suggests that the dialects of small elite groups often decline quickly. In Britain, for example, the speech of the heir to the throne seems to be rather old-fashioned, and younger members of the royal family are more in tune with current middle-class speech. In the United States, the upper classes of Boston and New York had no effect whatever on what became the American ‘Network Standard’ pronunciation. What becomes the standard appears to be determined largely by those whose jobs involve communicating widely in society; for example, business people, lawyers, journalists. The relative prestige of certain such groups may play a part in determining what becomes standard, and some of these people may possibly model their speech on a social group that they perceive to be above them, but a standard language is not the direct product of the language of the highest social groups, such as the very rich or the aristocracy.

LEGITIMACY

The establishment of the idea of a standard variety, the spreading of knowledge of this variety, its codification in widely used grammar books and dictionaries, and its promotion in a wide range of functions – all lead to the devaluing of other varieties. The standard form becomes the legitimate form, and other forms become, in the popular mind, illegitimate. They are commonly referred to as non-standard or even sub-standard. Historical linguists have been prominent in establishing this legitimacy, because it is important that a standard language, being the language of a country or sometimes a great empire, should share in the glorious history of that nation state. Indeed, the language is commonly seen as part of the identity of the nation state. In the 1920s the influential language historian H.C. Wyld regarded the standard variety as the most important ‘dialect’ and based his history of English on it. He claimed that other dialects were irrelevant except in so far as they had contributed to the history of the standard. To that extent, these dialects had a degree of legitimacy: Victorian dialectologists had demonstrated that these rural forms might be useful in reconstructing early stages of English. These dialects, therefore, had histories. With urban vernaculars, however, it was quite otherwise.

Urban forms of English, although probably used by a majority of the population at that time, were not considered to be ‘dialects’ at all: they were seen by Wyld (doubtless in agreement with general opinion) as vulgar and ignorant attempts to adopt or imitate the standard. Thus, they were thought to have no independent histories and were therefore illegitimate offspring. Since then, written histories of English from around 1500 have until quite recently usually been designed as histories of the internal structure of only one variety – standard English. This is seen as also including the language of literature, as the work of great authors also helps to confer legitimacy (and prestige) on the language. (If we can say that English is ‘the language of Shakespeare’, we are conferring additional honour upon it.) Histories of English are largely codifications of the history of the standard language, and these codifications are themselves part of the process of the legitimization of the standard language in its function as the language of the nation state and its colonies and ex-colonies. The historicization of the language requires that it should possess a continuous unbroken history, a respectable and legitimate ancestry and a long pedigree, and historical linguists have certainly conferred these things on English – but chiefly, as we have seen, on its standard variety.
We can conclude by noting that all standard languages have to be given some form of legitimacy, and all have to be maintained and protected through authority and ideas of correctness. There is usually also a tradition of complaining that the low quality of general usage and claiming that the language is degenerating. This too contributes to keeping the standard ideology in the public mind. In standard language cultures, it is believed that if the language is not maintained properly, it will corrupt and decay, and ultimately disintegrate. The future of the language, it is claimed, cannot be left to the millions of fluent native speakers who use it every day: if it is not taken care of by privileged authorities, it will surely decline.

KEY TERMS
standard variety -- (n) the dialect that is officially chosen to have prestige in a society, and is used for official documents, media, and public speech
standard language cultures -- (n) cultures that have a strong idea of a standard variety of language
standard language ideology -- (n) the idea that it is ‘right’ to standardize language and that everyone ought to use the standard variety
standardization -- (n) choosing a form as the right form, and making everyone use that form
uniformity -- (n) sameness; here, the idea that everyone should pronounce and use language in the same way
correctness -- (n) the idea that some forms of language are better or more ‘right’ than others
arbitrary -- (adj) having no real reason for being the way it is; random
authority -- (n) the power to make decisions about language that other people must obey
prestige -- (n) social value given to a pattern of language use; when people think “This is the right way to speak” or “This language/dialect is better than others”
stigma -- (n) the opposite of prestige; negative value given to a pattern of language use; people think “This is the wrong way to speak” or “This language/dialect is bad”
legitimacy -- (n) having the right to exist; if people think a variety of language is legitimate, they think it is the ‘real’ or ‘true’ form of the language

PEOPLE
Jonathan Swift -- a famous English writer from Ireland; born in 1667, died in 1745
H.C. Wyld -- language historian who wrote a history of English that focused on the standard dialect and treated all other dialects as unimportant

QUESTIONS
• Why is it useful to have a standard variety of language?
• Where do we see the idea of correctness in a standard language culture?
• What was Jonathan Swift’s attitude towards language change in English?
• How is a standard language maintained?
• How do prestige and stigma relate to standard language?
• How does a variety's status as 'standard' affect people's attitude towards its history?

FURTHER READING