

## 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Peter Burke*

It is high time for a social history of language, a social history of speech, a social history of communication. In the last generation or so, as the rise of feminist and regionalist movements shows, dominated groups have become more sharply aware of the power of language as well as the involvement of language with other forms of power. Whatever their other differences, the philosophers, critics and others associated with structuralism and deconstruction do at least share a strong concern with language and its place in culture. Whether they are involved with one or more of these movements, or with oral history (another relatively recent development), a number of historians have recently come to recognise the need to study language as a social institution, as a part of culture, as well as to develop a sensitivity to linguistic conventions so as to avoid misinterpreting the sources for more traditional kinds of history.<sup>1</sup> All the same, there remains a gap between linguistics, sociology (including social anthropology) and history, a gap which can and should be filled by the social history of language.

It is hardly news that language has a history. Ancient Romans and Renaissance humanists were interested in the history of Latin, while treatises on the origin of Italian, Spanish and other languages were published in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The dominant school of nineteenth-century linguists, the so-called 'Neogrammarians', was much concerned with the reconstruction of early forms of language, such as 'protoromance' and 'protogermanic', and with the formulation of laws of linguistic evolution.<sup>3</sup> This was the approach against which the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, now seen as the father of structuralism, reacted, because he considered that the historical school of linguists was too little concerned with the relation between the different parts of the language system.<sup>4</sup> In Saussure's day, however, the historical approach remained dominant. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, planned, as its title-page declares, on 'historical principles', began publication in 1884, while its French equivalent, edited by Emile Littré, goes back to 1863. Classics such as Jespersen's *Growth and Structure of the English Language* and Brunot's massive *History of the French Language* date from the early years of this century.<sup>5</sup>

2 *The social history of language*

However, this approach to the history of language lacked a full social dimension. Children of their time, the nineteenth-century scholars thought of language as an organism which ‘grows’ or ‘evolves’ through various stages and which expresses the values or ‘spirit’ of the nation which speaks it. Their concerns were national, or even nationalist, rather than social. They showed little interest in the varieties of the ‘same’ language spoken by different social groups, an interest which is central to contemporary sociolinguists, which crystallised into a discipline some thirty years ago.

Of course, awareness that different groups in a given society speak differently is far from new. Shakespeare expressed it in a number of passages in his plays, such as the famous scene in *Henry IV* in which Hotspur criticises his Kate for saying ‘in good sooth’ because this turn of phrase was not aristocratic: ‘you swear like a comfit-maker’s wife’. What Hotspur wanted to hear was ‘a good mouth-filling oath’.

A similar consciousness of the social meaning of speech differences is to be found in many nineteenth-century novels. Think, for example, of Rosamond Vincy, in *Middlemarch*, objecting to her mother’s phrase ‘the pick of them’ as ‘rather a vulgar expression’, while her carefree brother Fred counters with the assertion – which has its parallel among linguists today – that so-called ‘correct’ English is nothing but ‘the slang of prigs’. When the old lawyer Standish, in the same novel, swears ‘By God!’, the author intervenes to explain that he was using that oath as ‘a sort of armorial bearings, stamping the speech of a man who held a good position’. He used it, as we might say, as a status symbol. There would not in fact be any need for a social history of language if ordinary speakers were not aware, often acutely, of the social meaning of speech styles, while anyone wishing to rise socially has had to be hyperconscious of such matters.

Again, it is no new idea that language may be an instrument in the hands of the powerful, employed to mystify and control as well as to communicate, and that in Europe, for example, Latin was long used as a device to maintain the power of the clergy and other professional men such as doctors, lawyers and of course academics. In a dialogue published in 1546, the Florentine writer Gianbattista Gelli, who was not a member of the ruling class but a shoemaker, made one of his characters denounce the Latin liturgy as a trick of the clergy to keep the faith secret so as to ‘sell it to us retail’, while in 1584 another autodidact, the miller Menocchio Scandella, recently rescued from oblivion by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, told the inquisitors who were interrogating him that ‘speaking Latin is a betrayal of the poor’ because ordinary people cannot understand what is going on in court ‘and if they want to say four words they have to have a lawyer’.<sup>6</sup> A similar point about the use of ‘law French’ in English courts was made by Archbishop Cranmer, by James I, and by

radicals such as John Lilburne and John Warr during the English Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

All the same, as the philosopher Whitehead once remarked, ‘Everything of importance has been said before by somebody who did not discover it’: in other words, there is a considerable difference between a vague awareness of a particular problem and systematic research into it.<sup>8</sup> Pioneering explorations of the relation between language, thought and society were made in the 1920s by Ogden, Richards and Malinowski, and in the 1930s by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who was concerned with the acquisition of speech and writing (separate ‘linguistic functions’ in his view), and by the American linguist Benjamin Whorf, whose controversial but influential essays argued that the thought of a particular people, such as the Hopi – their conceptions of time, space and so on – was shaped by the structure of their language, its genders, tenses, etc.<sup>9</sup>

As for the stage of systematic research, it was reached a generation later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the development of what is variously called ‘sociolinguistics’, ‘ethnolinguistics’, ‘the sociology of language’, ‘the ethnography of speaking’ or ‘the ethnography of communication’, labels which stand for substantial differences in approach, but should not be allowed to obscure what the different schools have in common. If, in the 1980s, social historians wish to pay more attention to language, they would be well advised to turn for orientation to the work of such linguists as Dell Hymes, Joshua Fishman, John Gumperz and their pupils.<sup>10</sup>

What do these ethnographers and sociologists have to offer? An acute awareness of ‘who speaks what language to whom and when’, and an analytical framework, which includes a rich vocabulary. Just as the Bedouin have many words for ‘camel’, and Eskimos for ‘snow’, because they draw finer distinctions in these areas than the rest of us need to do, so the sociolinguists have many words for ‘language’.

In this vocabulary, a central concept is that of ‘variety’, ‘style’ or ‘code’, defined as a way of speaking employed by a particular group or ‘speech community’.<sup>11</sup> Simplifying brutally – as brief introductions must – it may be suggested that sociolinguists have used this idea of ‘variety’ to make four main points about the relationships between languages and the societies in which they are spoken (or written). These points may well seem rather obvious when they are stated in a bare and simple form, but they have not as yet been fully integrated into the practice of social historians. They are as follows:

1. Different social groups use different varieties of language.
2. The same people employ different varieties of language in different situations.

4 *The social history of language*

3. Language reflects the society (or culture) in which it is spoken.
4. Language shapes the society in which it is spoken.

The next few pages will comment on these points one by one and offer a few historical illustrations.

1 Different social groups use different varieties of language. Regional dialects are perhaps the most obvious example, but they are far from being the only one. The language of women, for instance, was and is different from that of men in the same society in a number of ways, which often include a predilection for euphemism and for emotionally charged adjectives, and a closer adherence to standard forms. Even their intonation is distinctive, a point which was not lost on Shakespeare: 'Her voice was ever soft/ Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman' (*King Lear*, Act 5, scene 3). As the last example suggests, women do not simply happen to speak differently from men but have been trained to do so in male-dominated societies, expressing their subordination in their speech. Even Mrs Thatcher has bowed to this convention and taken lessons in elocution in order to lower her pitch.<sup>12</sup>

Again, distinctive varieties of language have often been the mark of minority religious groups. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, English puritans were supposed to be recognisable by their nasal twang and also by their vocabulary, in which terms such as 'abomination', 'backsliding', 'discipline', 'edify', 'godly' and so on made a frequent appearance.<sup>13</sup> Quakers stood out from the rest not only because they insisted on using the familiar 'thee' and 'thou' to everyone, but also by their refusal to use certain common words, such as 'church' (which George Fox replaced by 'steeple-house'), and also by their special use of silence.<sup>14</sup> On the Continent, too, religious minorities were betrayed by their speech. In seventeenth-century France, for example, the speech of the Huguenots was so frequently larded with phrases from the Bible that it was known irreverently as 'the patois of Canaan'. The German Pietists were supposed to speak in a 'whimpering', 'whining' or 'sighing' manner, and also to employ distinctive turns of phrase such as 'the fullness of the heart' (*Fülle des Herzens*).<sup>15</sup>

Another cluster of speech varieties is associated with professional beggars and thieves, whose secret language (known in English as 'cant', in French as *jargon* and in German as *Rotwelsch*), appeared in print a number of times in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Varieties of language have also been associated with social classes, as two lively discussions which took place in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s may remind us.

It was the linguist Alan Ross who coined the term 'U' to describe the language of the British upper class, and 'non-U' for that of everyone else.

He explained, or more exactly asserted, that 'looking-glass' was U, but 'mirror' non-U; 'writing-paper' U, 'notepaper' non-U, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Considerable anxiety seems to have been aroused by this essay, and it is likely that usage changed in some circles as a result. However, there was nothing new about this type of distinction, and although it is widely believed to reflect a peculiarly English obsession with class, it does in fact have many parallels in other parts of the world.

In Philadelphia in the 1940s, for instance, it was U to refer to one's 'house' and 'furniture', but non-U to call them 'home' and 'furnishings'; U to 'feel sick', but non-U to 'feel ill'.<sup>18</sup> In Victorian England there were parallel distinctions, as the remark by Rosamond Vincy about 'the pick of them' would suggest.<sup>19</sup> In eighteenth-century Denmark, the playwright Ludvig Holberg put a character on stage to comment on the way in which language was changing to reflect some people's higher social aspirations. Such people, no longer content with such traditional, homely terms as 'boy', 'fiddler' and 'clerk', preferred to speak of a 'lackey', an 'instrumentalist' and a 'secretary'.<sup>20</sup> In seventeenth-century France, François de Callières, later private secretary to Louis XIV, pointed out differences between 'bourgeois ways of speaking' (*façons de parler bourgeoises*) and those of the aristocracy in his *Mots à la mode*.<sup>21</sup> In sixteenth-century Italy the controversial man of letters, Pietro Aretino, wrote a dialogue in which one of the characters claimed that a window should be called a *balcone*, and not (as was more common), a *finestra*; that it was proper to say *viso* for 'face', but improper to say *faccia* and so on. Aretino's tongue was well into his cheek (as, doubtless, were those of Holberg and Ross), but the joke would have had little point if other people had not been taking the matter rather more seriously.<sup>22</sup>

It is not only in the west that varieties of speech function as symbols of status. In Java, for example, the traditional elite have their own dialect (or 'sociolect'), distinctive in grammar as well as in vocabulary, while among the Wolof of West Africa, accent, or more exactly pitch, is a social indicator. The nobles speak in low-pitched quiet voices, as if they do not have to make an effort to gain their listeners' attention, while commoners speak in high-pitched loud voices.<sup>23</sup>

Whether the associations between a particular variety of language and a specific social group are necessary or arbitrary it is hard to say. From a historian's point of view, the important thing is to note that linguistic status symbols are subject to change over time, so that words which are U in one generation may not be so in the next. Regional accents have not always been non-U. Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have spoken broad Devonshire, and that arbiter of correct English, Dr Johnson, broad Staffordshire.<sup>24</sup>

However, it does not follow from this propensity to change that the

6 *The social history of language*

social symbolism of varieties of language is completely arbitrary. At the end of the last century, the Norwegian–American sociologist Thorstein Veblen produced the fascinating suggestion that the ways of speaking of an upper class (or ‘leisure class’, as he called it), were necessarily ‘cumbrous and out of date’ because such usages imply ‘waste of time’ and hence ‘exemption from the use and the need of direct and forcible speech’.<sup>25</sup> The Wolof example quoted above would seem to illustrate this point, for which it would not be difficult to amass many supporting examples. Some sixty years after Veblen, his idea of necessary links between varieties of language and the social groups employing them was reinforced by another sociologist, Basil Bernstein, whose arguments have generated considerable controversy.

Studying the language of the pupils in some London schools, Bernstein distinguished two main varieties, or as he called them, ‘codes’, the ‘elaborated’ and the ‘restricted’. The restricted code employs expressions which are usually concrete and it leaves meanings implicit, to be inferred from the context. The elaborated code, on the other hand, is abstract, explicit and ‘context-independent’. Bernstein has explained the contrast in terms of two very different styles of bringing up children, associated with two types of family, associated in turn with two social classes. Roughly speaking, the elaborated code is middle-class while the restricted code is working-class.<sup>26</sup>

Originally designed to explain the relative failure of working-class children to achieve good results at school, the theory has far wider implications. Like Vygotsky and Whorf, Bernstein has been exploring the relationship between language and thought. From the point of view of the historian of mentalities, there are intriguing similarities between the idea of the two codes and the contrasts which have so often been drawn between two styles of thought, whether they are labelled ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, ‘prelogical’ and ‘logical’ or, most usefully, ‘oral’ and ‘literate’.<sup>27</sup> Bernstein’s substantive points about British children at the time he was writing aroused a storm of criticism on the grounds that he failed to take account of the influence of the media or to examine the class system closely enough, that he suggested that people are prisoners of the code they use, and that he emphasised the weaknesses of the restricted code at the expense of its special strengths, while stressing the positive features of his own code, the elaborated one.<sup>28</sup> However, at a more general level, Bernstein’s hypotheses about the way in which styles of speech and thought are acquired remain extremely suggestive.

2 The second of our four points is that in different situations, the same individual will employ different varieties of language, or, as sociolinguists say in this context, different ‘registers’.<sup>29</sup> This point too had



been picked up by some nineteenth-century novelists. Hardy's Tess, for example, 'who had passed the 6th Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; and English abroad and to persons of quality'. What the sociolinguists offer to supplement this observation is an analysis of the 'strategies', conscious or unconscious, involved in switching from one register to another.<sup>30</sup> Studies of bilingual individuals and communities show how they switch from one language to another not at random but according to the situation, including under this heading not only the other participants but also the topic under discussion, the 'speech domain', as it is called. As the polyglot emperor Charles V is said to have remarked, French was the language to use to ambassadors, Italian to ladies, German to stable boys and Spanish to God. Alternatively, the switching may operate, as in Tess's case, between two varieties of the same language, 'high' or 'low', standard or dialect. Religion, for example, often seems to demand a relatively high or formal register, such as classical Arabic in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

Historians will have no difficulty in finding examples from many periods of the use of different registers. Latin, for instance, was a second language, spoken as well as written in medieval and early modern Europe by anyone with pretensions to learning, and associated with particular settings such as universities and schools. Lectures, disputations, orations were all in Latin, and not these alone. As late as 1677, at Queens' College, Cambridge, the President and Fellows gave instructions that the undergraduates should speak Latin in Hall at both dinner and supper. Schoolboys were often expected to speak Latin in the playground as well as in class, and a 'spy' (literally 'wolf', *lupus*) might be appointed by the master to ensure that lapses into the vernacular were reported and punished. In Luther's *Table-Talk*, the written record of the master's conversations at meals, kept by various disciples, we find him regularly switching from the vernacular into Latin, either because German in his time still lacked an adequate vocabulary for discussing certain topics, or because the dignity of a particular speech domain required a shift of this kind.<sup>32</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, Latin might be required on formal occasions in European universities, and scandal was caused in Leiden when a new professor insisted on giving his inaugural lecture in Dutch. The Latin speeches given at degree days in Oxford and Cambridge today are the vestiges of a long academic tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Again, in medieval and early modern Europe, French was a second language for a number of elites. In England and in southern Italy in the fourteenth century (as a result of the Norman conquests), in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, in Prussia in the eighteenth century, and in Russia – as *War and Peace* reminds us – in the nineteenth century,

8 *The social history of language*

speaking French was U, and people with aspirations to rise socially might make the effort to master it for that reason. As one fourteenth-century Englishman cynically observed, 'oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylff to gentil men, and fondeth with gret bysynes for to speke Freynch for to be more ytold of'.<sup>34</sup> It would be good to know more about the kinds of situation in which all this French was spoken outside France.

Of course, elites were not the only groups to speak more than language. On the borders between languages bilingualism was and is common, while people living near major trade routes have often learned a pidgin or lingua franca, such as the language of trade in the Mediterranean world (from which the term 'lingua franca' is itself derived), a language relatively well documented for North Africa in the nineteenth century, but one which has left documentary traces at least as far back as the fourteenth century, if not further.<sup>35</sup> In seventeenth-century Languedoc, where occitan was still spoken by most people most of the time, the Huguenots preferred French for talking to God, in other words as the language of the liturgy. When the French Protestants were persecuted in the late seventeenth century and a movement of resistance was organised in the Cévennes, some of its leaders, more especially the women, would not infrequently fall into convulsions and prophesy – but when they did so it was not in their everyday language but in French. French was for them a linguistic symbol of the sacred, as glossolalia has been from New Testament times to our own.<sup>36</sup>

Switching between dialect and a literary language is also well documented, at least for some regions and periods. In early modern Italy, for example, educated men were able to speak as well as to write Tuscan (the dialect which was in the process of becoming standard Italian), but they continued to employ their local dialect (Venetian, say) on occasion, although there has so far been little attempt to study what these occasions were in any systematic way. Venetian patricians might, for example, write erotic poetry in dialect, perhaps because they considered the subject deserved a 'low' style. Conversely, in nineteenth-century France, peasants who normally spoke patois might sometimes switch register into French. One of the few historians to have taken this subject seriously so far, Eugen Weber, tells us that a boy might employ French as a sign of formality when inviting a girl to dance, and also that peasants who discussed local politics in patois would switch to French to talk about national issues.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, our knowledge of such matters remains fragmentary. It is interesting to learn that Venetian was spoken in courts of law in the Republic in the eighteenth century, or that Tennyson used to tell bawdy stories in a Lincolnshire accent (although, unlike Sir Walter Raleigh and Dr Johnson, he did not speak with a regional accent the rest of the time),



but these pieces of information are not fully intelligible without a knowledge of their contexts, including a knowledge of the relevant language system, the rules for speaking in a particular culture. Ethnographers of speaking have been investigating these rules – how to be polite (or insulting), how to joke, how to ask for a drink and so on – but they have so far been rather neglected by social historians.<sup>38</sup>

Even silence deserves study from this point of view. ‘We have no history of silence’, as the literary critic George Steiner has observed. He was thinking of its place in modern literature and music, but a social history of silence would also have its interest. It would have to deal with changes in the rules – who should be silent (monks, women, children, servants and so on); when; where; and on what topics speech was taboo. It would have to be considered in relation to secrecy (who keeps what secret from whom, and what indirect methods are available, in a given culture, for ‘mentioning the unmentionable’).<sup>39</sup> It would also have to be considered in conjunction with noise, a subject which has engaged the interest of Raphael Samuel.

Without this kind of knowledge of linguistic rules, explicit or implicit, historians run a serious risk of misinterpreting many of their documents. To see through the glass clearly, rather than darkly, we need to become aware of the properties of that glass, for language is not unproblematically transparent. As the Canadian critic Marshall McLuhan used to say, ‘the medium is the message’.<sup>40</sup> More exactly, the medium, code, variety or register employed is a crucial part of the message, which the listener or reader or historian–eavesdropper cannot afford to miss.

The most obvious example to take here is that of the written language. This is only in rare instances a transcription of the spoken language, despite Jane Austen’s famous advice to ‘write as you would speak’, and needs to be treated as a separate variety with its own rules, varying with time, place, writer, intended reader, topic and, not least, literary genre, including in this category such everyday forms as letters of various types – the love-letter, begging letter, threatening letter, or whatever is appropriate to the particular culture.<sup>41</sup> In eleventh-century Japan, for example, a ‘next morning’ letter from a courtly lover to the mistress from whom he had just parted was not only *de rigueur*, but had to be composed according to strict rules which governed not only the poem which formed the focus of the message but also the calligraphy, the choice of paper, and even the spray of blossom to which the letter (properly folded) was attached. In traditional China, as in other societies, official documents had their own distinctive forms, which extended to calligraphy as well as phraseology, and these forms were taken as models for communication with the world of spirits, which was imagined to be organised into a ‘heavenly bureaucracy’.<sup>42</sup>

10 *The social history of language*

Although a social historian of Britain working on family papers of the seventeenth century (say) in a local record office may be unlikely to find anything so elaborately formal as the 'next morning' letter or the official request to the gods, there remains a general need for awareness of the rules of communication – written and unwritten – and of the rhetoric of everyday life. One of the most immediate tasks for social historians of language is to work out who, in a given place at a given time, used the medium of writing to communicate with whom about what: for much that has interested members of cultures of restricted literacy, or even cultures of near-universal literacy, was not written down. Sixteenth-century Venetians, for example, seem to have preferred not to discuss politics in writing, for obvious reasons of prudence (see below, p. 34). Much of popular culture long went unrecorded in writing, not only because most ordinary people were illiterate, but because the literate were either uninterested in popular culture, or ashamed of their interest, or simply unable to transcribe or transpose an oral culture in dialect into a written variety of the language. When it was eventually written down, much of this oral culture was bowdlerised. Whether this was to accommodate it to middle-class readers, or to the medium of writing, or both, is not altogether clear.

Since there are so many lacunae, readers may well be wondering whether a social history of speech is a viable enterprise at all, before the coming of the wire and later of the tape-recorder. However, in Western Europe from the later Middle Ages onwards, there are some extremely voluminous and relatively reliable sources for speech, notably the records of the courts. As David Garrioch remarks in his chapter on insults (see below, p. 107), courts were careful to have witnesses testify to the exact words spoken on particular occasions. The Inquisition took even more care. The instructions to the Roman inquisitors, for example, told them to ensure that the notary who had to be present at interrogations transcribed 'not only all the responses of the accused but also all the other remarks and comments he made and every word he uttered under torture, including every sigh, scream, groan and sob'.<sup>43</sup> A chilling directive, but its results, 400 years later, turn out to be invaluable for the social historian of language.

The students recording Luther's table-talk were presumably rather less accurate (how could they write and eat at the same time?). However, their text does have a colloquial flavour, and so do some transcriptions of sermons (those of S. Bernardino of Siena in the fifteenth century, for example), and some reports of speeches in assemblies such as the House of Commons, even before the professionalism of Hansard.

To these sources may be added the evidence of plays and novels, already utilised more than once in this introduction. They have to be used