15
Attitudes and applications

Example 1

Sir,

What are teachers doing today? They don’t seem to know the first thing about teaching pronunciation. One mispronunciation which really galls me is when people say LORE instead of law. On radio and TV LORE and order is replacing law and order in the speech of all the announcers. Can’t people see that lore and law, saw and soar are different words? Introducing these superfluous r’s all over the place is a sign of ignorance. Yesterday my son SOAR a frog in the pond he tells me. Though his teacher isn’t a bore, she appears to be a boor as far as teaching him which words have an r in them and which don’t!

People who hold strong views about the way words should be pronounced illustrate nicely the themes of this chapter. The issue of whether r should be pronounced or not pronounced in English is an especially good example of the arbitrariness of the linguistic features which attract such attention, as we saw in chapters 9 and 10. There is nothing intrinsically good or bad about [r]-pronouncing. Yet in some communities it is regarded as an example of ‘good speech’, while in others [r]-pronouncing is regarded as humorous, rustic and as evidence of lack of education. Ultimately attitudes to language reflect attitudes to the users and the uses of language, as we shall see in this chapter. There is nothing intrinsically beautiful or correct about any particular sound. Swallow, for example, has positive connotations when people associate the word with the bird, but if you define it as the action which follows chewing, the associations alter, and so do assessments of the word’s ‘beauty’. Context is all!

Some critics of [r]-less accents argue that they will disadvantage their users in the area of reading in particular. They argue that people who don’t distinguish the pronunciation of lore and law or sword and sawed are storing up literacy problems for the future. It is easy to demonstrate that such fears are ill-founded. While pronunciation differences can be a help in distinguishing different meanings, they are not essential. People manage to distinguish the meanings of son and sun, break and brake, and write, rite and right, despite the fact that they sound the same in most accents of English. But this kind of argument, linking linguistic attitudes which are based in social prejudice to often spurious educational consequences, is surprisingly widespread. The second section of this chapter discusses these issues as one
example of applied sociolinguistics, demonstrating the implications of sociolinguistic research in the ‘real world’. In the final section of the chapter, the research of sociolinguists in the area of forensic linguistics provides another illustration of how sociolinguistics can make a useful contribution in the wider society.

**Example 2**

‘Danish is not a language, but a throat disease,’ wrote one Norwegian respondent in reply to a 1950s postal questionnaire asking for Scandinavian people’s opinions of the relative aesthetic qualities of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian.

The results of the questionnaire placed Swedish first and Danish at the bottom of the pile. These results reflected not so much the relative aesthetic qualities of the three languages as the political fortunes of the three countries associated with each. Sweden was at that time the undoubted political leader, while Denmark – the former ruling power – was in a less influential political position. People’s attitudes to Swedish and Danish reflected Scandinavian politics rather than any intrinsic linguistic features of the language. With the rise of Danish influence through its membership of the European Economic Community, one would expect different results from a similar questionnaire in the twenty-first century.

It has been suggested that intelligibility is also affected by attitudes. People generally find it easier to understand languages and dialects spoken by people they like or admire. A closely related point, at least for majority group members, is that people are more highly motivated, and consequently often more successful, in acquiring a second language when they feel positive towards those who use it. Clearly attitudes to language have interesting implications both for politicians and language teachers.

People generally do not hold opinions about languages in a vacuum. They develop attitudes towards languages which indicate their views about those who speak the languages, and the contexts and functions with which they are associated. When people listen to accents or languages they have never heard before, their assessments are totally random. There is no pattern to them. In other words, there is no universal consensus about which languages sound most beautiful and which most ugly, despite people’s beliefs that some languages are just inherently more beautiful than others.

Attitudes to language are strongly influenced by social and political factors, as was evident in the discussion in many earlier chapters. Language varieties have indexing properties which all members of the community are aware of. Language planners must take account of attitudes when they select a suitable language for development as an official or national language. Attitudes to pidgins and creoles, for instance, present major impediments to their promotion and acceptance as official languages, or for use in schools. In other countries, the official status given to unpopular languages has caused problems. There have been riots in Belgium and India over language issues, and bombings and the removal or defacement of English road signs illustrate the strength of people’s feelings about the place of English in Wales. In Quebec, it was found in the 1960s that French-Canadians tended to rate English-Canadian voices on tape very positively, as more intelligent, competent and likeable, for instance, than French-Canadian voices. By the 1970s, however, ratings of French-Canadians were higher, reflecting increased political awareness, and the increased self-esteem that went with this. In the twenty-first century, English retains high status and is regarded as essential in the workplace, but there has also been more cultural and linguistic mixing, and some softening
of the antagonism between members of the Anglophone and Francophone communities. Language attitudes are very sensitive to social and political changes. The growing body of research comparing Quebec French and Parisian French indicates that interest in the distinctiveness of Quebec French has risen considerably, further evidence that attitudes to language provide insights about social, economic and political relationships.

Language attitudes can have a great influence in areas such as education. Arguments in Somalia about which script should be used to write down Somali, a Cushitic language, delayed progress in increasing literacy rates for decades. The most influential factors in this debate were not the intrinsic merits of the alternative scripts, but rather people’s attitudes to speakers and writers of Arabic and English and the functions for which those languages were used.

Supporters of Arabic script pointed to the prestige, the religious significance and the cultural importance of Arabic for the people of Somalia. It was claimed that some of the religious poetry written by Somalis in Arabic surpassed in its ardour and zeal similar compositions by the Arabs. Those who advocated the Latin alphabet pointed to its usefulness and the access it would give to scientific and technological information. An attempt at a hybrid script, known as Osmanian script after its inventor Osman Yusuf, was tried, but failed to catch on. Finally, in 1973 a Latin script was adopted and given official status. Some saw this as a triumph for efficiency over sentiment. Others regarded it as a bureaucratic decision in favour of a culturally sterile script. Attitudes to language certainly contributed to the years of stalemate and lack of progress in selecting a script in Somalia.

**Exercise 1**

How could you test whether people’s opinions about a language are based on the intrinsic linguistic features of the language (such as its sounds and its grammatical patterns) or derive from non-linguistic factors such as the social and political status of the speakers?

*Answer at end of chapter*

---

**Overt and covert prestige**

**Example 3**

_Elocution class in Belfast. The pupil has just recited a poem using the local Belfast pronunciation of words like Jane. The elocution teacher responds as follows._

**Teacher:** How do you pronounce her name?

**Pupil:** Jane (with an RP-like pronunciation)

**Teacher:** How do you remember that?

**Pupil:** The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain (with an RP-like pronunciation)

Prestige is a slippery concept. The meaning of overt prestige is reasonably self-evident. The standard variety in a community has overt prestige. Speakers who use the standard variety are rated highly on scales of educational and occupational status: their speech indexes their high social status. These positive ratings indicate the associations of their speech variety, which is generally held up as the ‘best’ way of speaking in the community. The standard is the variety
taught in elocution classes, regardless of the pupils’ native accents, as example 3 illustrates. It is overtly admired and generally identified as a model of ‘good’ speech by all sections of the community, regardless of the way they themselves speak. In fact, it has been suggested that this agreement about the standard variety or ‘best’ accent is what identifies a group of people as belonging to a speech community. Regardless of variation in their own speech, they all recognise one variety as the standard or norm for the community.

Covert prestige, by contrast, is an odd term which could even be regarded as involving two contradictory ideas. How can something have prestige if its value is not publicly recognised? The term ‘covert prestige’ has been widely used, however, to refer to positive attitudes towards vernacular or non-standard speech varieties. Clearly such varieties are valued or they would not continue to be used. Yet when people are asked to comment on them, they rarely admit to valuing them (at least to strangers). New Yorkers, for instance, vehemently denounce New York speech. One New Yorker described it as ‘incontrovertibly dumb’. After talking to many New Yorkers, Labov described the city as a ‘sink of negative prestige’! Similarly, in Norwich Trudgill was told ‘I speak ‘orrible’ by men who used the local vernacular. Yet people continue to use the forms they avowedly despise. The term covert prestige was therefore introduced to explain the fact that, despite their ‘official’ protestations, people clearly do in fact value vernacular varieties.

In some schools in Britain, and in New Zealand too, children are taught to speak RP in elocution classes, but they would never be caught using this accent outside the classroom. The local accent is the only possible way of speaking to friends, workmates and family. It expresses group identity and solidarity. Not surprisingly, many people do not want to sound like Prince Andrew, the Duchess of Kent or even the TV newsreaders.

There is also a large group of people who are not aware that they do not speak with the accent they admire and regard as the standard. Most people are surprised when they hear their own voices on tape. Some of this surprise usually relates to the pronunciations they hear themselves using. There is a story about a public speaker at a conference on speech who inveighed for some time against slipshod and sloppy pronunciations such as the use of gonna, for going to. He ended up with

‘And I tell you I believe that this deplorable pronunciation should be opposed by all teachers and eliminated entirely, and I’m gonna make damn sure that no child in my class uses it.’

Condemned out of his own mouth with a pronunciation which is a widespread and perfectly acceptable one, he collapsed red-faced and defeated in the face of gales of laughter from his audience. Similarly, in example 4 Labov tells the sad story of how he unintentionally disillusioned a New York woman and her daughter about the way they spoke, not realising how damaging his slice of reality would be.

Example 4

‘The case of Debbie S. and Mrs S. ends on an unhappy note. In the discussion of r, both mother and daughter insisted that they always pronounced all their r’s . . . They had ridiculed Speaker 2 [one of the speakers on the tape played to them] for dropping a single r, and they could not believe that they would make such a mistake themselves. Unwisely I played back the section of tape in which Mollie S. recited ‘Strawberry shortcake, cream on top, tell me the name of my sweetheart’. She could hear the consistent
The realisation that we do not always speak as we had imagined can serve as a warning not to be too hasty in judging the speech of others.

Exercise 2
This exercise is intended to give you some idea of how language attitude data is collected and of the kind of results which emerge. In order to make the exercise manageable, I suggest you use just two taped voices and ask for responses from a small number of people. To obtain results you could generalise from, it would be necessary to use more voices and many more respondents.

Tape a person from your community with a local accent telling you a story from their personal experience. Then tape someone with a standard accent (such as RP in England) from the television or radio, if possible talking on a similar personal topic. Then play excerpts from the two speakers to two or three of your friends or family and ask them to rate the speakers on the following scale.

**Speech rating scale**
Listen to the tape and then indicate with a tick where you would place the speakers on the following scales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker 1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>unpleasant</th>
<th>unattractive</th>
<th>un-self-confident</th>
<th>unlikeable</th>
<th>not fluent</th>
<th>unreliable</th>
<th>insincere</th>
<th>unambitious</th>
<th>unfriendly</th>
<th>unintelligent</th>
<th>no sense of humour</th>
<th>no leadership skills</th>
<th>uneducated</th>
<th>low status job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pleasant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attractive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-confident</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likeable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fluent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sincere</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambitious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intelligent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good sense of humour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>highly educated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high status job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What differences are there in the ratings? How would you explain them?

*Answer at end of chapter*
British Jamaican Creole, or Patois, which was discussed in chapters 2 and 8, seems to be gradually disappearing. But many of its linguistic features have been incorporated into local varieties of English. These new varieties are highly valued as markers of identity by their users. Moreover, it seems that Patois retains covert prestige since few Black people admit to outsiders that proficiency in this variety is greatly admired, especially among young British Blacks. As example 5 indicates, official attitudes to the linguistic varieties used by young Black people treat their speech as a deplorably deficient form of English which hinders their educational progress. Some teachers have described the language of their West Indian pupils as ‘babyish’, ‘careless and slovenly’, ‘lacking proper grammar’ and ‘very relaxed like the way they walk’! In fact, Patois is a language variety with a complex grammar, distinctive pronunciations and some distinctive vocabulary items as we saw in chapter 8. It has its own literary material. There are poets and novelists who write in Patois. But the new vernacular varieties of English which are gradually replacing Patois in the speech of young people are equally condemned by the wider society.

Overtly negative attitudes towards their speech reflect the depressed social position of West Indian people in Britain rather than features of the language varieties they use. West Indian migrants went to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s with a generally positive attitude looking for work. But Britain needed mainly unskilled workers, and as a result literate well-educated Caribbean people had to take low-paid low-status jobs. Despite this, they were confident that their children would do better as a result of a good British education. Unfortunately the reality has been different. By the late 1980s, West Indian people were still working mainly in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, earning less on average than other groups. Moreover, their children were not doing well at school. Not only were they not doing as well as children of indigenous British people, they were not even doing as well as the children of other immigrant groups in Britain, such as Greeks, Chinese and Indians. Schools have tended to blame the children and their language for their educational failure (a point mentioned in chapter 13 which will be discussed further below). But there is nothing linguistically inadequate about the way these children speak. Comments about the vernacular varieties of English they use are largely based on ignorance and prejudice. Most people are not aware of the full complexity of these vernacular varieties since they hear very little of it. It is the fact that they are used by West Indian immigrants – a low status group in Britain – that shapes attitudes towards these varieties.

Similar negative attitudes have been noted by linguists studying recently emerging non-standard varieties of London English, in particular. Since the 1950s, London has become steadily more multicultural. In any one borough of inner London in the twenty-first century, there at least one hundred different languages spoken by schoolchildren, with a total of around three hundred across the city as a whole. The result has been the emergence of the new variety described in chapter 8, Multicultural London English, sometimes called Jafaican. This variety is used by young people of diverse ethnicities, including black African-Caribbean,
black African, Bangladeshi, Moroccan, Columbian, Portuguese and white Anglo backgrounds. It is a systematic variety with a core of innovative phonetic, grammatical and discourse features, and it is learned from other young people in multicultural friendship groups. This variety too has been condemned by the wider public and by some teachers as ‘slang’ and ‘broken English’. Indeed young people themselves often (mistakenly) refer to it as slang.

Society’s overt evaluation of these vernacular varieties clearly reflects attitudes to the low social status of economically depressed (and especially black) immigrants and the children of immigrants in Britain. This was clearly demonstrated in a study which asked student teachers to rate recordings of five children they had never met all talking fluently on the topic of a visit to the dentist. The listeners heard a middle-class boy, two working-class children and two West Indian children. They rated the middle-class boy most intelligent, most interesting, best behaved and friendliest. Next came the working-class children who were both rated alike. Last came the two West Indian children. Yet one of the West Indian children actually spoke twice on the tape – though the listeners did not realise this. (This is known as the ‘matched guise’ technique.) She spoke once in the Barbadian (West Indies) accent which she used at home with her friends and family, and once in the working-class accent she used at school. So the same girl was viewed as more intelligent, for instance, when she spoke in her working-class accent than when she was identifiable as a West Indian. Clearly, it is the associated social status of the speakers which forms the basis of people’s evaluations.

In what follows, I will discuss in more detail first people’s attitudes to overtly valued varieties, such as standard English and the RP accent, and Standard American English (SAE), and then attitudes to covertly valued vernacular varieties, such as Multicultural London English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

**Exercise 3**

Discuss with five different people their views about the language of any immigrant group with which you are familiar. The method used to collect information on attitudes to language in exercise 2 (playing voices on a tape) tends to elicit overt norms and attitudes. With people you know well, you may be able to get beyond the overt attitudes to find out how they really feel about their own speech, the speech of other local people, the speech of immigrants and the way the TV newsreaders speak. Do people’s comments on language reflect the social status of the groups concerned, as suggested in the previous section?

Note any evidence in the comments you collect of a difference between covert and overt attitudes to language. In other words, do people criticise a variety which they nevertheless use regularly, while saying they admire a variety which they would never or very rarely use?

---

**Attitudes to standard English and RP**

**Example 6**

(a) ‘Next to our people our language is our greatest national asset; it is the essential ingredient of the Englishness of England.’

(b) ‘English ought to be the queen of the curriculum for any British child. It is one of the things that define his or her nationality.’
Standard English has an enormous legacy of overt prestige. It has been regarded as a symbol of British nationhood, as the quotations in example 6 indicate. For well over a century, it has been promoted as the only acceptable variety for use in all official domains, including education. By comparison, vernacular dialects of English are down-graded. The political and social basis of these attitudes is clearly evident, however, when we remember that the elite consensus until at least the eighteenth century was that English was a decidedly inferior language, less eloquent than Latin or Greek, or even than French and Italian. Prestige codes emerge by social consensus and owe nothing to their intrinsic linguistic features.

While there is general agreement on the inferior status of vernacular dialects (whatever their covert value as solidarity markers), many people are surprised to find that standard accents of English are so highly regarded by those who don’t use them. This is clearly illustrated by reactions to RP in England. When people are asked to assess RP speakers on tape they rate them as more intelligent, industrious, self-confident and determined than regional-accented speakers – even when the raters themselves speak with a regional accent. RP is rated ahead of all other accents on such criteria as communicative effectiveness, social status and general pleasantness. People who use RP accents are often taken more seriously, and RP speakers are more likely to persuade people to cooperate. And for RP-speaking women there are even further benefits. They are rated as more competent, less weak, more independent, adventurous and more feminine than non-RP speakers. This, incidentally, provides another good reason for the fact, noted in chapter 7, that women tend to use more prestige forms than men. Women are more positively evaluated by others when they use such forms. In New Zealand, recordings of women with ‘broad’ New Zealand accents were evaluated very negatively; they were even assessed as likely to be sexually promiscuous ‘sluts’.

Example 7

‘But in England, people of education and good social position all speak pure English. In New Zealand, this harsh and horrid brogue of ours is permeating every class of society; you get it in the speech of shop-girls and on the lips of university graduates.’

Even outside Britain, RP is still an overtly admired model in many countries where English is used, such as Singapore and New Zealand. While attitudes to local varieties vary, RP often has a guaranteed place among acceptable prestige forms.

The robustness of such attitudes is remarkable. School inspectors visiting New Zealand from Britain in the 1880s described New Zealand speech as ‘pure and undefiled’, preserving all that was good about English pronunciation. By the turn of the century, however, a New Zealand accent which was different from RP and British regional accents began to develop. The school inspectors’ reports became correspondingly less admiring and more critical. Agreeing with the letter writer in example 7, they called New Zealand English an ‘objectionable colonial dialect’. Subsequently, the New Zealand accent was described as ‘indescribable’, ‘corrupt’, ‘degraded’, and even ‘hideous’ and ‘evil-sounding’. Given the inspectors’ British origins, these views were predictable. What is rather more surprising is that many New Zealand teenagers in the 1980s and 1990s rated RP more highly than any New Zealand accent (though interestingly, by 1998, not as highly as a North American accent). One student responded to a recording of a distinctly New Zealand accent with the comment ‘God help us if we all sound like this.’
Once again, the social basis of these attitudes is very clear. Though there are many notable exceptions, including Prime Ministers David Lange, Helen Clark and John Key, it is still the case for most New Zealanders that a high level of education and a high status job is associated with an accent closer to RP than to broad New Zealand English. Hence the high ratings of RP – at least on overt measures.

It should be said that there have always been a few New Zealanders who took a different view, objecting, for example, to the adoption of imported so-called ‘refined’ upper-class vowels. But they have been a minority. On the other hand, while RP tends to be rated highly on the status dimension, as in Britain, local accents generally score more highly on characteristics such as friendliness and sense of humour, and other dimensions which measure solidarity or social attractiveness. This evidence of the covert prestige of regional accents and vernacular varieties is discussed further in the next section.

**Attitudes to vernacular forms of English**

In the early section of this chapter, I discussed attitudes to British Patois, a variety used by members of the West Indian community in Britain (and one which seems to be gradually disappearing in the twenty-first century, with some of its linguistic features being absorbed into local vernacular varieties). While attitudes are always changing, and new varieties of British Black English, such as Multicultural London English, are rapidly developing, these varieties can still be described as vernacular varieties which are generally condemned or ridiculed by those who consider themselves guardians of the language. They are often regarded ambivalently even by their users. Another example of a widely known variety of this kind is AAVE. Astonishingly, a recent study found that negative evaluations of AAVE could even be found among university students in Japan, suggesting that Japan has absorbed American racial stereotypes alongside many other American values. In the USA, AAVE has been at the centre of a debate about the role of vernacular varieties in education for at least four decades.

**African American Vernacular English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘. . . what makes me feel that blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K not A-X. And when they say aksed, it gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. And that is what I feel holds blacks back.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(female call-in viewer, Oprah Winfrey Show, 1987)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some examples of structural differences between AAVE and SAE were discussed in chapter 8. Most non-linguists, however, are unaware of the evidence for AAVE as a distinct and systematic variety. Consequently, criticism of AAVE has been well documented by sociolinguists for decades. As example 8 indicates, critics typically assume that AAVE use indicates ignorance rather than choice. Given the minuscule sound difference between [ask] and [aks], and the lack of logic in arguing for a particular pronunciation on the basis of a written form, it is ironic that ask has been a particularly frequent focus of comment. (And in fact [aks] for [ask] has a long history as a vernacular form since it can be found in the speech of the yokels in Shakespearean plays and in Chaucer’s tales too.) Yet this is quite typical of the kinds of comments made about AAVE use, no matter which particular feature is selected for condemnation.
Much media use tends to confirm these negative attitudes to AAVE. African American newsreaders and movie stars typically use SAE, while those entertainers and sports celebrities who do use AAVE features tend to restrict them to more intelligible, stereotypical features in less formal contexts. The prejudices of the wider community tend to be reinforced by such behaviour, as well as by the subtle reinforcement of negative attitudes provided by the depiction of AAVE users in TV shows and movies as less well-educated, down-at-heel and often unsavoury characters. One interesting analysis showed that the characters who used AAVE in successful Disney films such as *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King* represented animals rather than humans. This is how stereotypes are constructed and reinforced.

### Example 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negro Dialect</th>
<th>Substandard Negro Dialect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-standard Negro English</td>
<td>Black English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American English</td>
<td>Ebonics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernacular Black English</td>
<td>African American Vernacular English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AAVE is a prime example of a language variety which is so politically ‘hot’ that it has been constantly labelled and re-labelled, as example 9 illustrates. (See chapter 13 for a discussion of political correctness and euphemism.) The term ‘Ebonics’ was originally coined in the 1970s, but it was revived and popularised in the 1990s when the Oakland Unified School District Board of Education passed a resolution affirming the legitimacy of Ebonics (as they labelled AAVE) as a language system, and supporting its use as a bridge to learning standard English in school. The decision created a furore and even resulted in a Senate sub-committee hearing on the status of AAVE and its role in education.

Many African American parents were unconvinced of the benefits of using AAVE and concerned that the time would be better devoted to acquiring SAE. Their letters to the newspapers and contributions on talk-back and call-in shows expressed fears that the use of AAVE in schools was just another strategy for preventing their children from achieving educational success. On the other hand, many successful African Americans asserted the importance of maintaining and giving status to AAVE, and of resisting attempts by the majority group to impose SAE on everyone.

### Example 10

‘Language is political. That’s why you and me, my Brother and Sister, that’s why we sposed to choke our natural self into the weird, lying, barbarous, unreal, white speech and writing habits that the schools lay down like holy law. Because in other words the powerful don’t play; they mean to keep that power, and those who are the powerless (you and me) better shape up mimic/ape/suck-in the very image of the powerful, or the powerful will destroy you – you and our children.’

(June Jordan, poet, writer, political activist)
Adopting SAE, even for part of the time, seems a betrayal of their home dialect to many African Americans. The issue has become too politicised for the notion of a broader verbal repertoire, or the construction of different social identities, to provide a simple resolution. For many minority ethnic group members, ethnic identity is fundamental and colours or infuses everything they say and do, think and believe. From this perspective, advocating bidialectalism is perhaps like asking a woman to pretend to be a man for the duration of each working day, or vice-versa.

The Ebonics debate of the 1990s thus re-ran the familiar arguments about the social disadvantages of using AAVE. Reduced to its basic element the argument is:

\textit{If you use AAVE you won’t get a good job.}

But those who put forward this argument generally imply that African American children who use SAE \textit{will} get good jobs. This is the fallacy. It is clear from the evidence provided by USA employment statistics that it is ethnicity rather than language which is the primary basis of discrimination. Moreover, those African Americans who do succeed, achieving occupations such as airline pilots and army officers, are often mistaken for service personnel in public places. The problem is racist attitudes, not linguistic deficit or even dialect difference. These issues are developed further in the next two sections.

\section*{Vernacular forms of English, users and contexts}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Example 11}

‘Attention to the rules of grammar and care in the choice of words encourages punctiliousness in other matters . . . The overthrow of grammar coincided with the acceptance of the equivalent of creative writing in social behaviour. As nice points of grammar were mockingly dismissed as pedantic and irrelevant, so was punctiliousness in such matters as honesty, responsibility, property, gratitude, apology and so on.’
\end{quote}

Support for so-called ‘grammar’ teaching often derives from the misleading association of grammar with authority, hierarchy, tradition and elitism, order and rules, as illustrated by this quotation. What is meant here is not ‘grammar’, but a number of arbitrary, superficial rules of formal standard English. Such advocates do their cause more harm than good. It is difficult for a sociolinguist to take seriously the suggestion that using standard grammar encourages honesty, or that the use of vernacular forms has any connection with ingratitude.

In \textit{chapter 6} we saw that the standard dialect is primarily a socially defined entity, not a linguistically defined one. Standard English is the English used by educated people with relatively high social status (generally referred to as the middle class). So, middle-class children speak standard English, and children from other social groups do not.

It is also worth emphasising a point that was illustrated in \textit{chapter 10}: no one uses 100 per cent vernacular or non-standard forms. When people talk of non-standard English they are referring to the fact that particular linguistic forms occur more often in the speech of one group than another. Omission of the verb \textit{be} in utterances such as \textit{she not here}, the use of multiple negation, and the substitution of [d] for [ð] in words such as \textit{the} and \textit{then}, for instance, are all features of vernacular dialects, but people who use these forms generally know and use the standard forms too. They simply use fewer standard forms than those who come from different
socio-economic or ethnic groups. Our speech also expresses and constructs our identity. The reason that vernacular forms survive is attitudinal. As mentioned above, working-class children do not want to sound like David Cameron or Hillary Clinton. They do not even want to sound like their teachers, however well they get on with them. If they were to speak like their middle-class friends, their families would laugh at them for sounding ‘posh’ or ‘stuck-up’ or ‘prissy’.

It is also true that everyone increases their use of standard forms as the context becomes more formal. This means that middle-class children are unlikely to use any vernacular forms at all when they are asked to read aloud, for instance, whereas children from lower socio-economic groups may use some vernacular forms. The use of vernacular forms is clearly patterned and systematic, not random and haphazard. The number of standard forms in everyone’s speech increases in formal contexts like school and a law court, while the number of vernacular forms increases in relaxed casual contexts such as the playground and the home. Vernacular forms express the friendliness and relaxed attitudes appropriate in casual contexts.

I have tried to show that the reasons people condemn vernacular forms are attitudinal, not linguistic. Children who use vernacular forms are not disadvantaged by inadequate language. They are disadvantaged by negative attitudes towards their speech – attitudes which derive from their lower social status and its associations in people’s minds. Unfortunately, these attitudes often have unhappy educational consequences, as we shall see in the next section. First, however, a brief look at methods of collecting attitude data.

---

**Exercise 4**

Think of three ways that a sociolinguist could find out about a community’s attitudes to a particular language variety. Identify one advantage or strength and one disadvantage or weakness of each method.

*Answer in the next section*

---

**A note on methodology**

Collecting information about attitudes to language is a tricky business. While we can use direct observation and questions to elicit overt attitudes, it is much more difficult to discover how people evaluate vernacular varieties, especially those which are overtly condemned or ridiculed in the media. There are three main ways that people have used to collect information on attitudes to language, and they have all been referred to or illustrated at various places in this book.

1** Societal treatment**

Sociolinguists can infer attitudes by observing the way language is used in the public domain. This is a very unobtrusive method of collecting data, and a wide variety of materials can be used for this purpose. Government documents can provide information on the status of different languages for instance; educational documents can give clues about teachers’ views about students’ language; employment advertisements can indicate which languages or varieties of a language are favoured by employers. The representation of dialect in novels is
another source of attitudinal information: less well educated people are often represented as using vernacular grammar and strong regional accents. Cartoons often parody dispreferred language features and they can provide useful insights on societal stereotypes. The cartoons in chapter 12, for instance, provide information on how society views aspects of male–female interaction. Research on the linguistic landscape (discussed in chapter 5) provides further insights into attitudes to language. The language of advertisements (written and spoken) can indicate preferred speech styles and accents, for instance, while multilingual advertisements often indicate the associations of different languages in a particular country or community: e.g. Italian with romance and passion, French with good food, German with reliability, English with technology and success. Even t-shirts can convey attitudes to language with socio-political messages such as Kōrerotia te reo Māori!, ‘Speak Maori’.

People regularly express views about language issues on the radio, on TV, on the net and in the press. Sociolinguists record people’s views and collect letters from the public in newspaper and magazines as evidence of people’s attitudes to language. Many of the examples in this book, such as example 10 in chapter 5, example 2 in chapter 9 and example 1 in this chapter, are instances of this type of contribution. They provide one kind of evidence about attitudes to language. These sources of attitude data are relatively easy to access. They can provide useful clues to language changes in progress, and suggest areas for further study. Though data collected in this way is rarely adequate for a sociolinguist to come to definitive conclusions about how widely such attitudes are shared, it can provide interesting indications of the range of attitudes held in a community. A study of attitudes to the Maori language expressed in 51 Letters to the Editor in the early 1990s, for instance, identified a range of arguments that people drew on to support their pro-Maori or anti-Maori claims. So, observation can be a good starting point for research and a useful source of information about some aspect of attitudes to language, but it rarely provides a representative picture of how widely held such views are.

2 Direct measures
Sociolinguists can ask direct questions about people’s attitudes to particular languages or language varieties or even linguistic features: e.g. do you like the Welsh language? do you think Welsh sounds beautiful? do you like the sound at the beginning of the Welsh word Llandudno? These closed yes/no questions are easy to code so you can collect answers from large numbers of people using a written questionnaire or an interview schedule, and then count the responses easily. Written questionnaires can be anonymous and they can even be sent out to large numbers of people by post, thus accessing a large sample of the community.

Less easy to count are open questions: e.g. what do you think of the way the Queen of England speaks? what are your views about African American Vernacular English? what do you think about the pronunciation [aks] for [ask]? Answers to these questions require some analysis; they need to be categorised at least into those which are for and against and, as a result, it is less easy to draw nice neat conclusions about people’s views. But they also offer the possibility of eliciting richer and more interesting data since the researcher hasn’t decided in advance on what the relevant dimensions of analysis will be. Using more open-ended questions, it is possible to be surprised and learn something new.

One major disadvantage of such direct approaches to collecting information about attitudes is that people may not reveal their true attitudes, especially if they feel that their views are unacceptable in the wider community. So if they secretly admire or hate Maori or Welsh
or Singlish or AAVE, they may not admit this to an interviewer who appears to represent a group unsympathetic to their views. Clearly, the age, ethnicity, gender and social background of the interviewer may also influence people’s responses in this way. Closely related is a pattern known as ‘acquiescence bias’ where respondents give the answers they think their interviewer is looking for. Psychologists have demonstrated that this is culturally influenced, so people from some cultures are more likely to provide agreeing responses to questions than people from others. Anonymous questionnaires can help in resolving such dilemmas, but the response rates to written questionnaires tend to be very low, and the people who respond are often those with a particular barrow to push, i.e. a special interest in the topic. So the results will not be representative of the views of the community as a whole. Students in lecture theatres are often asked to respond to such questionnaires because they provide a captive and usually cooperative audience. But their results present the same problem; they are hardly representative of the wider community.

3 **Indirect measures**

A third way of collecting data on language attitudes is to use an indirect measure which elicits the respondents’ attitudes without making them feel self-conscious or embarrassed. The most sophisticated form of this method is the ‘matched guise’ technique described above. Typically, listeners hear tapes of two people saying the same thing but speaking in two different languages or two different varieties. The listeners are unaware that the four samples they hear are produced by just two speakers. Moreover, they are asked to evaluate the personality of the speakers rather than the language variety itself. Since the personality of the speakers is constant for the pairs of voices, this cannot in principle be an influence on the responses. So since attitudes to language and its users and uses are inextricably intertwined, as this chapter has described, people’s responses inevitably tell us something about their attitudes to the language. Many variations of this basic strategy have been developed involving a number of bilinguals and a range of varieties of languages and accents.

The most radical variation involves simply playing taped stimuli of different languages and accents to listeners and asking them to respond to the voices on a range of dimensions such as those provided in the rating scale in exercise 2. Obviously this approach does not keep the personality of the speakers constant, but the problems that have been identified relate not so much to variation in the personality of speakers, but rather to the problem of getting speakers who sound equally fluent and confident. Stutters and hesitations have a huge influence on people’s judgements. So getting data which is truly comparable is a major challenge for this methodology.

As a footnote to this brief discussion on methods of collecting data on language attitudes, it is perhaps worth mentioning that observing what people do can also provide a measure of their attitudes to language. Enrolment in language classes is a good indication of a positive attitude to a language, for example. Attending events such as plays and concerts which use the language is another. One clever study sent an invitation to an evening of Puerto Rican singing and dancing to people who had indicated in a questionnaire that they held positive attitudes to Puerto Rican people and to the use of Spanish. They were being asked to demonstrate their commitment. Another study asked people to respond to a questionnaire in a different language each evening at the theatre and deduced people’s attitudes by the numbers who responded to each request. You can probably think of some weaknesses in these methods, but they are attempts to circumvent the problem that what people tell a researcher and what they really believe are not necessarily the same.
Chapter 15  Attitudes and applications

Attitudes to language are important to sociolinguists for a variety of reasons. In chapter 4 we saw that they were important in the description of pidgin and creole languages. Social dialectologists have claimed that shared attitudes to speech or shared speech norms are the crucial criteria in defining members of the same speech community. Attitudes to vernacular varieties or the languages of disfavoured groups affect many teachers’ academic expectations of those who use these varieties, with implications for their academic progress. Not surprisingly, it has also been found that attitudes to the way people speak affect employers’ decisions about who to hire. Clearly, attitudes to language have implications in many social spheres and illustrate well the ways in which sociolinguistic research often has an applied dimension. In the next section, I will give some examples of ways in which sociolinguistic research has proved useful in the educational sphere in particular.

Exercise 5

It has been suggested that attitudes have three components: a cognitive component (e.g. what we know or believe about a language), an affective component (e.g. how we feel about the language) and a conative component (e.g. what we are likely to do in relation to a language).

So, if we were measuring attitudes to Welsh we could investigate what a person believes about the Welsh language, how they feel about the language and what they seem likely to do that would indicate their attitude to Welsh.

A very positive overall attitude would be indicated if they (1) believe that Welsh will help them to get a good government job in Wales, (2) consider that poetry written in Welsh and songs sung in Welsh are beautiful and (3) are currently enrolled in a Welsh language class.

How might these components differ for languages such as American English and endangered Hawaiian in Hawai’i?

Answer at end of chapter
Sociolinguistics and education

Vernacular dialects and educational disadvantage

Many sociolinguists have been drawn into public debates about the educational implications of their research. The best-known example is probably the part sociolinguists have played in debates over the place of vernacular dialects in schools, and the claims that children who use vernacular forms are linguistically deprived or deficient.

It has been evident for some time that in many speech communities middle-class children do better at school than working-class children. They get better exam results, for instance. Similarly, though there are some exceptions, children from the mainstream culture generally have greater success in school than minority group children. In English-speaking communities, these facts have often been misleadingly linked to the fact that children from the successful groups tend to use more standard dialect forms — they use standard English — while the speech of children from the less successful groups often includes a greater frequency of vernacular forms.

This is an area where some sociolinguists have tried very hard to be helpful. Some have undertaken research to investigate the extent to which the use of vernacular forms or a distinct variety like Patois in Britain may act as a barrier to communication between teachers and pupils. Others have interpreted the results of sociolinguistic research for teachers and provided advice and recommendations for classroom practice. A widely quoted example involved the legal case in the USA which is described in example 12.

Example 12

In 1977, Moira Lewis was 8 years old. She lived in the city of Ann Arbor in the USA in Green Road, an area where there were both rich and poor people. She went to the local school, Martin Luther King Elementary School. It was a school with mainly white children, but there were also some African American children like Moira, and a few Asian and Latino children. By the time Moira was 8, her mother was getting concerned that she was not doing well at school. She talked to some of the other African American mothers and found they were worried too. The school took the view that Moira and her African American friends were problems — they labelled them as ‘learning disabled’. But Moira’s mother and her friends knew better. Their kids were perfectly healthy, bright children. It was the school which was failing not the children. The mothers decided to take the school to court claiming that the teachers were not adequately providing for their children’s education. The mothers won their case, and the school was required to provide a programme for Moira and her friends which gave them a better chance of educational success.
In this example, the African American mothers argued that the local school was not taking proper account of their children’s linguistic proficiency and educational needs. A number of sociolinguists were called as ‘expert witnesses’ to testify that the variety of English used by the children was a dialect distinct from SAE, with a distinct history and origins in a Creole which developed on American slave plantations. The judge accepted their testimony and ordered the school to take account of features of the children’s dialect. He pointed out that the teachers and children could understand each other, and expressed the view that the main barriers to the children’s progress took the form of unconscious negative attitudes held by the teachers to children who spoke AAVE. The steps that were taken to remedy the situation consisted mainly of in-service training for the teachers. This involved, for example, helping them distinguish between features of the children’s dialect and reading errors, and suggesting ways they could help the children develop the ability to switch between AAVE and SAE.

Dialect differences can certainly lead to miscommunication, especially if vernacular dialect users do not hear a great deal of the standard dialect. In most English-speaking communities, however, as in Ann Arbor, there is little evidence that children who use vernacular forms have trouble understanding the standard English they hear on television, on radio and from their teachers. In fact, sociolinguists have demonstrated that in some communities, at least, children clearly do understand the standard dialect, since when they are asked to repeat sentences in the standard they often translate them accurately into the vernacular equivalents, as the pairs of sentences in example 13 demonstrate. The (b) sentences are the child’s repetition of the (a) sentences.

**Example 13**

(a1) Nobody ever sat at any of those desks.
(b1) Nobody never sat at no desses.
(a2) I asked Alvin if he knows how to play basketball.
(b2) I aks Alvin do he know how to play basketball.

Translation presupposes understanding. If, as these examples suggest, understanding is not usually a major hurdle, the next question is whether anything should be done to change the speech of children who use vernacular forms.

Sociolinguists have pointed out that attempts to alter people’s speech without their full cooperation are fruitless. People can change their own speech if they really want to, but teachers and parents simply waste their time correcting children’s usage if the children do not want to sound different. It has been noted that when children imitate their teachers for fun, or when they role-play a middle-class person in a game or a school activity, they often produce consistently standard forms for as long as required. Motivation and free choice are crucial factors, and any attempts to teach standard dialect forms will not succeed without them.

If, however, children can see some point in being able to use standard forms consistently in certain contexts, such as job interviews, then, with the information provided by sociolinguists, teachers can provide students with guidance on which vernacular forms are most salient to listeners. Many sociolinguists believe, however, that their primary obligation is to educate the community to accept variation and vernacular forms, without condemning or stereotyping their users as uneducated and low status, rather than to train vernacular users to adopt standard speech forms. This is an area of ongoing debate in educational linguistics.
Linguistic deficit

A related area where sociolinguistic research has proved useful is in the area of educational testing. Sociolinguists have successfully demonstrated that claims that minority group children and working-class children were linguistically deprived were generally based on inadequate tests. The major contribution that sociolinguists have made in this area is to provide evidence about the effect of contextual factors on speech.

An example will serve to illustrate this point. In order to determine the extent of their vocabulary and grammar, it is usual to ask children to complete a number of language tests. At one time, these tests were often administered by an adult stranger from a different social background from the child, and sometimes from a different ethnic group from the child too. As a rule, each child was interviewed individually in a quiet room in the school. Children from minority and working-class backgrounds who were tested under these conditions generally did not do well. They responded monosyllabically, saying as little as possible, and escaping with relief after it was all over. Middle-class children, on the other hand, tended to do much better. They were much more willing to answer questions at length.

Sociolinguists pointed out that, although those administering them thought they were administering these tests under ‘standard’ and ‘controlled’ conditions, there were in fact some important differences in the experiences of middle-class children compared to others being tested. An adult stranger using the standard dialect would be more likely to resemble the friend of your mother or father if you were a middle-class child. If you were not a middle-class child, your experience of adults who used the standard variety would be teachers, social welfare workers and government officials – not the sort of people a child would be likely to want to talk to for long if it could be avoided.

Example 14

Michelle came home from school after her history exam.

‘How did you get on?’ asked her mother. ‘What did they ask you?’

‘I had to write about Captain Cook,’ Michelle replied.

‘What did you say?’ asked her mother.

So Michelle told her all the interesting stories about Captain Cook’s adventures that she had recounted in her exam answer. Finally her mother interrupted, ‘But didn’t you mention that he was one of the first Europeans to discover New Zealand?’

‘Oh no,’ she replied, ‘I think they know that!’

The kind of questions the interviewer asked would also be more familiar to middle-class children. Middle-class parents are much more likely to ask children to ‘display what they know’. When grandma visits, for instance, little Pauline is instructed ‘Tell grandma what you
did on Sunday’. This kind of question is used in language tests too, e.g. ‘Tell me everything you can about this picture.’ To a child who is used to being asked questions like these - questions to which the questioner obviously knows the answer - such instructions are not a problem. Other children may find them puzzling and wonder if there is a catch or a trick involved. In other words, the testing conditions are not the same for all the children.

Sociolinguists were able to provide evidence that children who responded monosyllabically in a test-interview were voluble and communicative in different contexts – with their friends, for instance. One researcher showed that the evaluative constructions used in story-telling by the African American teenagers that he recorded were more developmentally advanced or mature than those used by the whites. In other words, claims that these children were linguistically deficient or ‘had no language’ or were limited to a ‘restricted code’ could be roundly refuted. The formality and unfamiliarity of the testing context for these children accounted for the misleading inference that they were linguistically deprived.

It was also pointed out that the language of the tests was more similar to that of the middle-class children than to that of children from other social groups. When responses to the test questions were analysed, it was found that sometimes answers which were factually correct but which used vernacular forms were marked wrong, because they didn’t exactly match the form of the answers on the marking schedule. Once again, evidence from sociolinguists was valuable in demonstrating that the children’s language was linguistically systematic and well-structured and not inadequate or deficient.

**Exercise 8**

The following dialogue took place between an adult and an African American child in a New York school.

The black boy enters a room where there is a large, friendly white interviewer, who puts an object on the table in front of the boy and says, ‘Tell me everything you can about this.’ (The interviewer’s further remarks are in round brackets.)

[12 seconds of silence]
(What would you say it looks like?)
[8 seconds of silence]
A space ship.
(Hmmmm.)
[13 seconds of silence]
Like a je-et.
[12 seconds of silence]
Like a plane.
[20 seconds of silence]
(What colour is it?)
[6 seconds of silence]
(An’ what could you use it for?)
[8 seconds of silence]
A je-et.
[6 seconds of silence]
(If you had two of them, what would you do with them?)
At secondary level (students aged 11 and above), sociolinguists have explored more specifically the ways in which the vocabulary range of middle-class children differs from that of working-class children. Through wide reading of the kinds of books that teachers approve of, and exposure to the vocabulary of well-educated adults, some children are more familiar than others with words of Graeco-Latin origin. These words – words like education, exponent, relation and expression – make up between 65 per cent and 100 per cent of the specialist vocabularies of subjects taught in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Obviously, children who are familiar with such words will be at an advantage. One study showed that between the ages of 12 and 15 massive differences developed in the oral use of such words by children from different social backgrounds.

Children who use words of Graeco-Latin origin with familiarity and confidence are clearly more likely to succeed in exams which require knowledge of such vocabulary in particular subject areas. Children from homes where adults don’t read for entertainment, and where reading is not a normal everyday activity, tend to develop a different range of vocabulary – one which is of great value in many spheres of their daily lives, but of little relevance in understanding the materials they meet in secondary school textbooks.

One reason why working-class children fail in school, then, is that the odds are stacked against them. The criteria for success are middle-class criteria – including middle-class language and ways of interacting. Familiarity with the vocabulary essential to school success gives middle-class children an advantage. A second reason identified by sociolinguists is that many of the children, recognising that schools are essentially middle-class institutions, deliberately and understandably rebel against all that they represent. One very dramatic piece of evidence of this was provided by a study of male adolescent gangs in New York. The gang members were failing in school, yet many were bright, verbally skilled young men. To maintain a position as a gang leader in the Harlem district of New York, for instance, requires a quick wit and considerable verbal facility. They could trade insults with ease and respond quickly and wittily to verbal challenges. There was little doubt about their oral language abilities. Yet most
Chapter 15  Attitudes and applications

of these teenage boys were three or more years behind in their reading levels, and none had
a reading score above the norm for an 11-year-old. What was more, the higher their status
in the gang, the lower was their reading score. The reasons are complicated, but the most
basic and important one was that they did not share the school’s ideas of what was worth
knowing. They did not identify with the school’s values, and they knew that the school did
not recognise their skills and values. They felt they had been defined as outsiders from the
beginning, and saw no point in conforming since there was no chance of success.

Exercise 9

One sociolinguistic study of an African American working-class community showed that
the verbal skills expected of boys and girls differ considerably. Both learn how to deal
with ‘analogy’ questions asked by their elders. These encourage them to see parallels and
connections among disparate events and to tell about them cleverly without spelling out
explicitly what the links are. Allusiveness is valued, rather than explicitness, and the resulting
style has been described as ‘topic-associating’. Boys, however, are also encouraged to practise
story-telling in competitive public arenas where adults as well as children watch and judge.
How might these different cultural experiences affect the success of the children in school?

Answer at end of chapter

Structural differences between standard and vernacular varieties may lead to inaccurate
assessments of children’s educational potential. Differences between groups in their percep-
tions of the appropriate ways of talking in a variety of contexts may also lead to inaccurate
evaluations of children’s ability. This section has illustrated how sociolinguists have used the
information described in this book about the relationships between language and its users, and
language and its uses, in order to identify a range of misconceptions which can disadvantage
some social and ethnic groups in school. Forensic linguistics is another area where socio-
linguists can make a contribution to redressing social injustices based on misconceptions
about language use and language variation. The final section of this chapter illustrates some
of the social benefits of the work of sociolinguists who focus on language use in legal settings.

Sociolinguistics and forensic linguistics

Example 16

Raj, a man with a strong West Indian accent, was accused of murder in Britain. During
his trial, the prosecution alleged that Raj had stated that he had got on a train and shot
a man to kill. A socio-phonetician was able to demonstrate that what Raj had actually
said was that he got on the train and showed a man ticket.

The person transcribing the West Indian man’s statement in this case was unfamiliar with the
variety of English that he spoke and so, although she honestly transcribed what she thought
he said, she was wrong. Fortunately, a qualified linguist who was familiar with the range of
variation in different dialects of English was able to provide an alternative and much more
reliable account of what the West Indian had said.
Forensic linguists work in a very wide range of social contexts. In addition to research about how language is used in written and spoken legal settings, they also provide expert evidence to courts about language issues. Sometimes this involves analysis of language and communication in legal contexts such as police interviews, courtroom interaction or legal documents. Or it may entail examining language used in academic writing (for example in plagiarism cases), in trademarks, in phone conversations, in text messaging and in email interactions. In providing expert evidence to courts, forensic sociolinguists aim to identify sociolinguistic clues and understandings which will assist in resolving legal questions and contribute to justice being done.

Forensic linguists have contributed as expert witnesses to court cases involving murder, sexual assault, kidnapping, fraud, drug dealing and many more such serious crimes or legal injustices. The case of Robyn Kina, discussed in chapter 13 (example 12), illustrated how the evidence of a sociolinguist about the patterns of interaction in the English used by many Aboriginal people, including Kina, helped overturn a false conviction for murder. Sociolinguists have also questioned the expertise of people who have used language tests to make judgements about the nationality of people seeking refugee status. Often there is simply insufficient information about sociolinguistic and dialectal variation to reliably make such judgements.

Forensic linguists examine every level of linguistic analysis. Phonetic analysis provides information on regional and social accents which has often assisted in eliminating crime suspects. So, for example, a British dialectologist was able to accurately identify the Sunderland accent on a hoax tape sent to the police by someone who claimed to be the infamous serial killer known as the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’. The linguist’s phonetic analysis was proved right twenty-six years later when DNA from the envelope seal confirmed the identity of the hoaxter.

Lexical evidence has been used to demonstrate the likelihood of plagiarism. Linguists helped in addressing some of the controversies surrounding the source of materials in The Da Vinci Code, for example. Sociolinguists have also assisted in identifying characteristics of the likely author of less public texts, such as anonymous threatening letters. It is often possible to identify features which suggest that the author is not a native speaker of English, for instance, or that they are not highly educated, or that they come from a particular social or ethnic background.

Grammatical evidence has supported claims that a text written to explain procedures was incomprehensible, thus excusing an error which had serious consequences. Linguists have also identified grammatical strategies which can disadvantage witnesses in court cases. The passive voice and intransitive verbs, for example, are often used by defence lawyers to avoid attributing agency to a person accused of a crime, as in example 17.

Example 17

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{you think you were cheated} \\
\text{your shirt came off} \\
\text{your arms were held over your head} \\
\text{so were your legs bruised?}
\end{align*}
\]

In all these examples, the agent has disappeared and the focus has shifted to the victim. The syntactic form of a question also limits the range of permissible answers, and thus the range of information the addressee feels free to offer, as illustrated below. If in court, for example, you are asked the question Did you drink more than two glasses of beer?, then, inhibited by the formal context, you may feel you are restricted to answering only yes. A more informative
response might be I had three small glasses over four hours and accompanied by a large meal. Moreover, the latter answer might well provide a more useful basis for evaluating your ability to drive at the end of the evening.

Example 18

Prosecution lawyer: So you were wandering around the area for over two hours that night
Accused: I was walking around the district looking for a shop

The semantic features of words can convey very different associations with important consequences. Walking around sounds purposeful, for example, while wandering around suggests aimless activity, a subtle difference which may be significant to the impression that the jury forms about someone's character. In some dialects, going partying implies drugs and sexual activity, i.e. it means more than just go to a party, and such distinctions may be significant under cross-examination. The semantic scope of words can also be relevant. For example, when a Torres Strait Creole speaker uses the word kill, it sounds like the English word meaning 'cause to die'. But in Torres Strait Creole kill means 'hurt' or 'maim'. The potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding and the serious implication in an assault or murder case are obvious.

Police interviews have received a good deal of attention from forensic linguists, and especially the police caution, called in the USA 'the Miranda warning'. This refers to the advice about their rights that the police are required to give to people who are suspects before they begin an interview. Sociolinguistic analysis of the discourse suggests that conversations between the police and the suspects, supposedly simply explaining the suspect's rights, involve persuasion and suggestions in some cases, as well as reassurance and expressions of empathy in others.

Example 19

PO = Police Officer

1. PO: OK now do you agree that just a short time ago
2. PO: in the company of Wally Peters you were
3. PO: Sergeant Allen read you your rights as a person in custody?
4. Suspect: (quietly) Yeah.
5. PO: And that was this form here this Caution and Summary
6. PO: of Part 10A on the 4-Crimes Act?
7. Suspect: (quietly) Yeah.
8. PO: OK and you signed that?
10. PO: OK. Now did you understand that –
11. Suspect: Yes.
12. PO: What do you understand by by your rights?
13. Suspect: Oh (pause) my rights?
14. PO: Do you understand that while you’re in police custody
15. Suspect: (that police have certain they have a duty of care
16. Suspect: to do certain things for you?
17. Suspect: Yeah.
An introduction to sociolinguistics

The forensic sociolinguist, Diana Eades, points out that although the police officer invites the suspect to explain his rights in his own words (line 12), he actually provides no opportunity for him to do that. When the suspect expresses uncertainty *oh my rights?* (line 13), the police officer responds with a long utterance (lines 14–16) full of legal terminology e.g. *a duty of care to do certain things for you*. Sociolinguistic analysis of a large number of police-suspect interviews indicates that suspects often consider a question such as *what do you understand by your rights?* as challenging and face-threatening. There is much to consider and critique in even a short extract such as this, and some forensic linguists have made an effort to communicate the results of such analyses so that they can be used in police training.

For similar reasons, forensic linguists have used discourse analysis to examine courtroom interaction for evidence of potential injustice. In cross-examination, the lawyer’s choice of words can be very significant in conveying a particular perspective. Sexual assault trials are prime targets for such analysis, and sociolinguists such as Susan Ehrlich have identified a number of pragmatic strategies which lawyers use to suggest that the victim was willing rather than resistant.

### Example 20

Q is the prosecuting lawyer; Connie is the rape victim.

1. Q: And I take it part of your involvement then
2. on the evening of January 27th
3. and having Mr A. come back to your residence
4. that you felt that you were in this comfort zone
5. because you were going to a place that you were very familiar correct?
6. Connie: It was my home, yes.
7. Q: And you knew you had a way out if there was any difficulty?
8. CD: I didn’t really take into account any difficulty.
9. Q: I never expected there to be any.
10. I appreciate that. Nonetheless, you knew that there were
11. other people around who knew you
12. and obviously would come to your assistance
13. I take it if you had some problems
14. or do you know? Maybe you can’t answer that.
15. Connie: No, I can’t answer that. I can’t answer that.
16. Q: I was inviting him to my home
17. not my home that I share with other people
18. not you know a communal area.
19. Q: I was taking him to my home
20. and I really didn’t take into account anybody else around
21. anybody that I lived near.
22. Q: It was like inviting somebody to your home.
23. Q: Fair enough. And I take it from what you told us
24. in your evidence this morning
25. that it never ever crossed your mind
26. when this whole situation reached the point
27. where you couldn’t handle it or were no longer in control
28. to merely go outside your door to summons someone?
29. Connie: No.
The underlined questions control the direction and scope of the discourse by asserting a proposition with the implication that it is a reasonable one, and that the addressee will confirm it. The lawyer uses the word *knew* (lines 8, 11) reinforced by the word *obviously* (line 13) which implies that what is being asserted is a fact, and which presupposes it is true. The accumulated assertions undermine Connie’s position by suggesting there was help available and she didn’t seek it. In addition, the word *merely* (line 29) suggests that it would have been easy to seek such help, indirectly indicting her for not doing so and thus avoiding the assault.

The result of the consistent use of such strategies is the disempowerment of the female complainant. Through the ways in which the lawyer’s questions are formulated, she is subtly constructed as having failed to take steps to protect herself. In other words, skilful use of linguistic strategies can result in the blame for the assault being shifted from the perpetrator to the victim.

### Exercise 10

In the extract below, identify the different ways in which the lawyer and complainant describe the ‘same’ social context, and consider the implications of their different choices.

#### Extract from rape trial

**Lawyer:** And you went to a bar in Boston is that correct?

**Complainant:** It’s a club

**Lawyer:** It’s where girls and fellas meet, isn’t it?

**Complainant:** People go there.

**Lawyer:** And during that evening didn’t mister Jones come over to sit with you?

**Complainant:** Sat at our table.

*Answer at end of chapter*

### Conclusion

This chapter has described a range of attitudes to languages and varieties of language, as well as some of the social, educational and legal implications of such attitudes. The linguistic varieties of different groups and their sociolinguistic rules, or appropriate ways of speaking in different contexts, may be quite distinctive. Sociolinguistic information on the social basis of attitudes to these varieties and their uses helps explain why children from lower socio-economic groups and children from minority cultural backgrounds often do not succeed in middle-class classrooms. Sociolinguistic research can assist in identifying points of potential conflict, and suggesting alternative styles of interaction which may be more successful.

There has been space in this chapter to explore only a very small range of examples, specifically in the fields of educational linguistics and forensic linguistics, where the implications and applications of sociolinguistic study may be beneficial in the wider community. Reflecting on the sociolinguistic variation described in previous chapters, you will be able to think of many more implications and applications of sociolinguistic research. Language planning, for example, discussed in chapter 5, is an obvious area of applied sociolinguistics, both at the macro-level of advising on national languages, for example, and the micro-level of devising orthographies, or recommending specific instances of non-sexist terminology. Second language learning is another area where sociolinguistic information on patterns of