



# Chapter 2

## Language and social groups

In this chapter you will:

- Look at the ways in which different groups of people use language
- Evaluate research into the language of social groups
- Explore the varying functions and uses of language in a range of contexts

### 2.1 Idiolect and sociolect

In the last chapter you looked at the ways in which language varies from place to place and how this is manifested in different linguistic features such as accents and dialects, and features of Standard or non-Standard English. In this chapter, you will consider how language varies from person to person, not just on an individual level but how each one of us belongs to certain identifiable groups and how that affects and shapes our language.

It has been well established by linguists that each individual has their own individual language style, be it their tone of voice, handwriting, use of certain phrases and vocabulary items, or their use of particular grammatical or interactive constructions. An individual's own language style is known as an **idiolect**. In some cases, this idiolect is instantly recognisable: think of familiar presenters on the TV or radio and you might be able to hear a person's voice and even their catchphrases or vocal cadences, without trying too hard. Think of your own immediate family: do your parents, grandparents or siblings have ways of talking that are instantly recognisable as their own?

Some linguists have argued that each of us has a linguistic fingerprint – a style of language that is unique to each of us and that can be used to identify us – and have gone as far as to suggest that in the future we will all be identifiable by the language we use. Writing about the field of forensic linguistics, Malcolm Coulthard argues that this is still some way off. However, he notes:

Every speaker has a very large active vocabulary built up over many years, which will differ from the vocabularies others have similarly built up not only in terms of actual items but also in preferences for selecting certain items rather than others. Thus, whereas in principle any speaker/writer can use any word at any time, speakers in fact tend to make typical and individuating co-selections of preferred words. (Coulthard 2004)

But individuals are not just born speaking differently: we develop language in interaction with people around us and from the communities we are part of, and this leads us to the concept of **sociolect**. If idiolect is an individual language style, then sociolect is a language style associated with a social group.

#### KEY TERMS

**Idiolect:** variation in language use associated with an individual's personalised 'speech style'

**Sociolect:** the language used by a particular social group, e.g. teenage school children, adults in a book club



The term 'social group' can be slippery to define, but we are all members of different groups, whether we want to be or not. People might share characteristics such as social background, age, occupation, interests and activities, and these help to classify them into groups. Additionally, many of these groups overlap, so it might be argued that people belong to a number of different social groups at the same time and that their language is often shaped by – and sometimes constructed through – the groups that they belong to.

For example, people who play online games such as *World of Warcraft*, *The Elder Scrolls* or *RuneScape*, belong to a social group, even if they do not personally know the other people they are playing with (because it's carried out through an internet connection, rather than face to face), and will inevitably share some of the language characteristics of that group because they are engaged together in the same activity. This will probably consist of vocabulary items related to the games they play and the locations and characters within them, but also a set of terms that might be familiar to players of other games of this genre, such as 'RPG' (role-playing game), 'tank' (a character who is heavily armoured and can cause a lot of damage to opponents), 'boss' (a top-level enemy) or 'mobs' (monsters that appear in larger numbers in a game). As well as this **field-specific lexis**, gamers will use language to describe their reactions in a game and to describe their fellow gamers (and opponents).

The nature of online chat varies, depending on whether it uses Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), which is spoken language relayed from one player to others, or chat messages, which rely on keyboards and online 'writing'. The platform or **mode** being used can have an influence here, so gamers who are playing without speaking to collaborators or competitors may well be typing short abbreviated messages such as GG (good game), AFK (away from keyboard) or more widely recognised terms such as LOL (laughing out loud) and ROFL (rolling on floor laughing). Those speaking over an internet connection might not use as many of these abbreviations (because they do not need to shorten what they are saying for ease of communication) but might instead have a particular style of interaction and turn taking with other players that is very much part of the activity they are involved in.

### KEY TERMS

**Field-specific lexis:** vocabulary that is only related to a particular field of work or activity

**Mode:** the physical channel of communication: either speech or writing

On the other hand, a social group that an individual is part of might have little connection with their interests and be more closely related to their personal background. Social class is something that can define our life chances and even life expectancy, but it is also a significant influence on language. We will look in more detail at a range of areas – occupational groups and social class among them – later in this chapter, but first we will need to think about what we mean by social groups and the reasons for different forms of language being used within them.

## 2.1.1 Language and social identity

While one of the main functions of language is to communicate ideas and feelings from one person to others (a transactional function), language also fulfils an important role in signalling identity (an interpersonal function). On one level, the language choices made by an individual can signal something about them as individuals and the persona they would like to project, whether it is respectful, polite, relaxed, rebellious, cautious, caring or excited, but on another level the language choices of an individual can also signal a complex range of connections between an individual, other individuals and the society they are part of (or in some cases, see themselves as separate from).

Think about the various different words that exist to describe what would be termed (in Standard English) as the police. A variety of terms is used nowadays to describe police officers and many more have been used in the past. Some of these signal respect for authority: 'Members of Her Majesty's Constabulary' might be such a term, where the deliberate reference to the Queen places the police officer's role within a traditional British hierarchy. However, the 'Old Bill' (a term dating back to the 1950s, according to Jonathon Green's *Dictionary of Slang* (2010)) is less respectful and perhaps brings to mind (to people of a certain age and social background) the slang of criminals from London's East End. If you were to describe the police as the 'Feds' or 'Po-po', it might suggest an American or African-American influence on your language, and perhaps signal a disdain for their work, while describing the police as 'the filth' would be seen as extremely disrespectful. However, by using a particular term, an individual is signalling a great deal about their attitudes to society and their affiliation (or otherwise) to what might be perceived as its mainstream values. While it might not be socially acceptable in mainstream society to refer to the police as 'the filth' in formal conversation, the use of the term in some situations might confer a degree of covert prestige upon the speaker among some of their friends. By using this term, a social identity might be conferred on the speaker that is seen to be at odds with mainstream social values. Whether the person saying it is a middle class, privately-educated farmer's daughter or the working class son of a career criminal, the use of the language signifies something about the identity that speaker would like to have, would like to project and the groups he or she would like to identify with.



Julie Coleman, in *The Life of Slang* (2012), suggests a scenario in which a white male student uses the expression ‘Sam, mate. I’m so *crunk!*’. While ‘*crunk*’ can easily be defined with a quick look at a slang dictionary (crazy + drunk, excited), Coleman points out that ‘the meaning of “*crunk*” is less important than its interpersonal function. Because “*crunk*” tends to be used in the context of hip hop and rap music, it confirms that Jack likes and understands the music and the cultural trends that go along with it.’ (Coleman 2012)

So, if language is being used to signal aspects of our identities and our desire to show affiliation towards, or distance from, other groups of people, it is important to think about how and why this is done. Language writer and TV presenter, Susie Dent, writing about what she calls ‘tribes’ (a term she uses to describe the social or occupational groups that many people belong to) explains that, ‘Every sport, every profession, every group united by a single passion draws on a lexicon that is uniquely theirs, and theirs for a reason. These individual languages are the products of a group’s needs, ambitions and personalities ...’ (Dent 2016)

Dent goes on to discuss the identity-forming (and identity-reinforcing) role of such sociolects and occupational registers (or forms of lingo, as she puts it): ‘Whatever our reason for using it, our lingo is our identity. Whether it’s the craic [Irish term for “humour”] of comedians or the verbal sidesteps of politicians, private languages are a loud marker of who we are or want to be, and where we fit (or don’t) in society.’ (Dent 2016)

Some forms of language will signal that we are part of a group, or wish to be seen as part of it (so-called in-group language), while at the same time keeping others out. The activities we are engaged in will inevitably have an impact on the language we use as part of the group as well as the nature of the group.

## 2.1.2 Discourse communities and communities of practice

Those who belong to particular groups – be they social or occupational – often belong to discourse communities. A **discourse community** is a group of people engaged in similar activities, usually work-based or around a specialist interest, who use language in distinct and identifiable ways.

John Swales (1990) defines a discourse community as having members who:

- have a shared set of common goals
- communicate internally, using one or more mechanisms and genres of communication
- use specialist vocabulary and discourse primarily to provide information and feedback

- have a required level of knowledge and expertise to be considered eligible to participate in the community.

Discourse communities use language for shared purposes and, as Swales puts it, ‘In a discourse community, the communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursive characteristics.’ (Swales 1990)

The specialist lexis employed by many discourse communities makes communication much easier within the group – the shared terms and frames of reference allow the members to assume a certain degree of prior knowledge and understanding, for example – but can be confusing and opaque to outsiders. The term **jargon** is often applied to such technical or professional lexis, and the term sometimes carries connotations of disdain, implying that the language is sometimes deliberately obscure in order to prevent others understanding it. The Plain English Campaign sees such language as a barrier to understanding and since 1997 has ‘been campaigning against gobbledygook, jargon and misleading public information’.

### KEY TERMS

**Discourse community:** a group of people with shared interests and belief systems who are likely to use language in similar ways

**Jargon:** the vocabulary and manner of speech that define and reflect a particular profession which may be difficult for others to understand

The media representation of the language of some occupational groups can be quite critical. Texts 2A and 2B are extracts from an article in *The Huffington Post* about workplace speech and an article on *The Conversation* website about business jargon.

#### Text 2A

That’s not to say that all jargon-users are liars; some well-meaning language-manglers are just trying to fit in with their contemporaries. But that doesn’t make it excusable. The use of a rapid verbal shortcut is an attempt to convey a point without pausing to consider whether or not the correct point is being conveyed, or whether or not the point is worth conveying at all.

The promotion of thoughtless chatter is noxious enough, but contemporary workplace jargon isn’t always just trite — it can also create an atmosphere of belligerence. Office speak can be aggressive,



patriarchal and, when you really consider the language, remarkably unprofessional. *Killing it and bleeding edge* seem straight out of *American Psycho*, or at least a hyped-up workplace fueled by caffeine, testosterone and high fives. Offices (well, American offices, anyway) have long employed masculine ways of speaking, borrowed from sporty or militaristic language—consider teamwork, give 110 percent and take it to the next level. Or worse: targeting clients with guerrilla marketing.

Extract from Maddie Crum, 'Why Workplace Jargon is a Big Problem' (The Huffington Post, 25 April 2014)

#### Text 2B

During the past decade, surveys by pollsters, HR [Human Resources] agencies and academics have canvassed workers' views and identified the use of jargon as a major irritant. Junior executives and office workers in particular feel intimidated and excluded by superiors' obscure and pretentious language. They also suspect that this is often employed to conceal incompetence, or disguise unpalatable decisions.

The version of Chinese whispers through which such language spreads can result in embarrassing gaffes. Across the piste, a phrase inspired by skiing, became fashionable not long ago to mean something like 'taking the widest perspective' or 'affecting a wide range of people'. Through mishearing or misunderstanding, many professionals now say across the piece, while a hapless few are guilty of across the beast.

It is inevitable that technical language will cross over into everyday usage, when it deals with aspects of technology and commerce, for instance big data, the internet of things, crowdfunding and clickbait. This is also the case when language describes changes that are affecting our lives such as negative equity, downturns and downsizing, outsourcing and offshoring, or when it provides a shorthand for fairly complex concepts such as 'the glass ceiling', 'the precariat' or 'soft power'.

But the spread of management-speak and the language of the market into other spheres is not something neutral or innocent, as academic linguists working in the field of what's called critical discourse analysis have pointed out.

It carries with it the ideology – the values and assumptions – of market capitalism.

Extract from Tony Thorne, 'Translated: the baffling world of business jargon' (The Conversation, 29 January 2016)

#### ACTIVITY 2.1

##### Workplace jargon

Think about the ways in which these extracts present workplace language and try to pinpoint some of the language choices made by the writers. How do these choices help create a sense of workplace jargon as a problem to outsiders? What are the wider problems of using business jargon implied in the second text? What alternative arguments could you offer, in defence of some of the language used by people in different occupational groups?

What do you understand about the meanings of the jargon terms that have been used? Look up their meanings to find out more about them.

An alternative way of theorising about groups of people using language together is to see them as **communities of practice**. While the notion of discourse communities is one that derives from the discipline of linguistics (and is primarily concerned with language – hence *discourse* community rather than community of discourse), the originators of the ideas around communities of practice were the anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, so in their model the community of people comes first and the practice – for our purposes, the *linguistic* practice – comes second. Linguists such as Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992) and Emma Moore (2010) have made use of the idea of communities of practice to explore how groups of people interact with each other to develop ways of making sense of what they are doing, ways of organising within the group and (probably most importantly from our perspective) ways of talking. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet put it themselves:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social construct from the traditional notion of community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. Indeed, it is the practices of the community and members' differentiated participation in them that structures the community socially. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992)



**KEY TERM**

**Community of practice:** a group of people engaged in a shared activity or practice, whose language is shaped by the activities they are mutually engaged in

Moore's ethnographic study of teenage girls aged between 12 and 15 from Bolton in the north-west of England (2010) looks at four communities of practice: the Poplars, the Townies, the Geeks and the Eden Valley Girls, all of whom come from a range of different social backgrounds but who differentiate themselves from other social groups. According to Sue Fox's account of the Eden Village Girls' study on the Linguistics Research Digest, Moore was able to observe a number of areas including:

the girls' personal appearance and style, the people that each of them spent time with, the activities that they engaged in and the girls' attitudes to their own membership of groups and towards other groups. (Fox 2011)

By focusing on one linguistic variable – the use of the verb form *was* or *were* in a standard 'I was', or non-standard 'I were', construction – Moore noticed varying uses of the feature. Some were clearly linked to class and social background, particularly among the Eden Valley Girls who were all from a higher social class than the other groups, but in other cases it appeared that the nature of the group's identity might have been more important than the social class make-up of that group. What this might suggest is that while linguists have long known that many variables such as gender, region, age, class and ethnicity can have an influence on language use, the social practices of groups can sometimes be more important in shaping language identity.

## 2.2 Social class and language

The social context that we are born into is one key way in which we might be grouped. Social class as a concept is something that is notoriously difficult to define and consists of a number of factors including:

- type and level of education (state/private, university and post-16)
- family income
- cultural activities (music, theatre, computer games, opera, etc.)
- social circles and friendship groups.

Sociologist Fiona Devine and economist Mike Savage (Savage *et al.*, 2013) identified seven social classes in the UK and the forms of 'capital' of each class

from a survey they conducted in January 2011. Their findings (summarised in Table 2.1) were based on the responses of 160,000 people to the 'Great British Class Calculator' commissioned by the BBC.

Table 2.1: Adapted from the BBC's Great British Class Survey

Class	Economic, cultural and/or social capital	Other characteristics
Elite	High levels of all three capitals	High economic capital distinguished them from all other classes
Established middle class	High levels of all three capitals but lower than the elite	Gregarious and culturally engaged
Technical middle class	High economic capital but less culturally and socially engaged	Small new class with few social contacts
New affluent workers	Medium levels of economic capital and higher levels of cultural and social capital	Young, active group
Emergent service workers	Low economic capital but high cultural and social capital	New class of young people, often in cities
Traditional working class	Low levels of all three capitals but higher economic capital than the precariat	Average age is older than in other classes
Precariat	Lowest levels of all three capitals	Members' everyday lives are precarious

The link between language and social class is an interesting one and can itself be influenced by many other factors. A working class person from Leeds (in the north of England) will not necessarily use the same language features as a working class person from Oklahoma (in the USA), nor will a middle class person from East London speak like a middle class person from Dublin (in the Republic of Ireland). However, members of these social classes may share some characteristics of non-Standard English, compared to the often Standard English of upper class speakers.

The anthropologist Kate Fox, writing about language and class in her book, *Watching The English*, describes what she terms the different linguistic class codes which are often based on stereotypes of behaviour:

The first class indicator concerns which type of letter you favour in your pronunciation — or rather, which type you fail to pronounce. Those at the



top of the social scale like to think that their way of speaking is 'correct', as it is clear and intelligible and accurate, while lower-class speech is 'incorrect', a lazy way of talking – unclear, often unintelligible, and just plain wrong. Exhibit A in this argument is the lower-class failure to pronounce consonants, in particular the glottal stop – the omission (swallowing, dropping) of 't's – and the dropping of 'h's.

But this is a case of the pot calling the kettle (or 'ke'tle, if you prefer) black. The lower ranks may drop their consonants but the upper class are equally guilty of dropping their vowels. If you ask them the time, for example, the lower classes may tell you it is 'alf past ten' but the upper class will say 'tɪpsti'. Handkerchief in working-class speech is 'ankercheef', but in upper-class pronunciation becomes 'ɪnkrɪtʃ'. (Fox 2005)

Linguists are generally careful not to describe language using **deficit models**. As a non-linguist, Fox might be forgiven for describing language variation as 'lazy' or 'wrong', particularly when she is even-handed in her criticisms!

### KEY TERM

**Deficit model:** a way of describing a form of language as lacking, or deficient in, some quality – linguists tend to avoid such judgements

## 2.2.1 Researching language and class

Studies of language and social class often focus on accent as a marker of social identity and status, and foreground the differences between what are perceived to be working class (often regional) accents and Received Pronunciation (RP) which became established as the most socially prestigious accent in the UK in the early- to mid-Victorian period.

There is no doubt that some accents are perceived to be more 'posh' than others and for a long time RP has carried these connotations. There is nothing intrinsically better in one sound than another, but the social class and status connotations of some sounds have been established and reinforced in their use by those of an upper class background for many years. Interestingly, attitudes to RP vary, depending on who you ask, where they live and their own social class.

Writing about RP and the studies carried out by Howard Giles in the 1970s, Peter Trudgill notes that:

It was apparent from Giles' work that RP was perceived as being an accent associated, in the absence of information to the contrary, with speakers who were competent, reliable, educated, and confident. It

was also perceived as being the most aesthetically pleasing of all British English accents. On the other hand, RP speakers scored low on traits like friendliness, companionability, and sincerity, and messages couched in RP also proved to be less persuasive than the same messages in local accents. (Notice also that there is a long history in American science-fiction and horror films for sinister, menacing characters to be given RP accents.) (Trudgill 2001)

A 2014 survey by the polling company YouGov (see Table 2.2) noted that RP was seen as attractive by 53 per cent of those surveyed in the UK, compared to 22 per cent who saw it as unattractive, but this varied according to the location, age, social class, political leanings and gender of the respondents.

### ACTIVITY 2.2

#### Investigating attitudes

Think about a way to measure attitudes to different accents. Perhaps you could write a short script and ask friends with different accents – RP and a regional one – to read the script aloud. If you then record these and play them back to others, you can ask what the respondents like or dislike about each recording. Also think about the limitations of such a study and how you might devise a more developed methodology for a bigger project. Remember to be ethical in your research and seek the permission of the respondents to use their data.

## 2.2.2 Language up and down: convergence and divergence

It is these varying attitudes to RP that perhaps explain why some RP-speakers in positions of authority and power in the UK feel the need to change their accent when speaking to members of different social classes. In one infamous incident, former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon 'George' Oliver Osborne (privately-educated son of a seventeenth century baronet) was derided for dropping his RP accent and speaking 'mockney' (mock-Cockney, an accent associated with working or lower middle-class speakers from the south-east of England) to an audience of supermarket workers at a Morrisons warehouse. (The footage of Osborne's speech can be found here in a clip from ITN: [www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6011](http://www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6011).) Sam Masters, writing for the Independent newspaper in 2013, described it as follows:

The Old Etonian has previous when it comes to letting his normally immaculate and dainty received pronunciation slide for big speeches. But when he said he was 'findin savins' he was immediately subjected to



Table 2.2: YouGov survey results (2014). For each of the following accents, please say how attractive or unattractive you think they are...

Fieldwork: 27th – 28th November 2014														
	Gender			Age				Social grade		Region				
	Total	Male	Female	18-24	25-39	40-59	60+	ABC1	C2DE	London	Rest of south	Midlands/Wales	North	Scotland
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Cockney</b>														
Very attractive	3	3	4	3	2	4	4	3	3	8	3	3	2	2
Fairly attractive	22	18	26	15	22	20	28	22	22	23	27	22	16	19
<b>TOTAL ATTRACTIVE</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>
Fairly unattractive	30	28	32	27	29	30	31	32	27	32	28	29	29	37
Very unattractive	25	29	21	29	26	27	21	26	24	15	20	27	35	26
<b>TOTAL UNATTRACTIVE</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>63</b>
Neither attractive nor unattractive	15	16	13	15	13	17	13	14	16	13	17	13	14	11
Don't know	6	6	5	10	9	3	2	4	7	9	5	6	3	5
<b>Received Pronunciation (BBC English)</b>														
Very attractive	14	13	14	11	13	14	15	16	11	24	17	8	11	8
Fairly attractive	39	36	41	41	36	38	41	43	34	37	41	41	36	32
<b>TOTAL ATTRACTIVE</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>40</b>
Fairly unattractive	14	15	13	9	18	13	13	13	16	11	12	18	13	21
Very unattractive	8	9	6	9	7	7	9	5	11	5	6	8	12	9
<b>TOTAL UNATTRACTIVE</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>30</b>
Neither attractive nor unattractive	19	19	19	19	16	23	18	19	19	15	19	16	24	22
Don't know	6	7	6	10	10	5	4	4	9	8	5	8	5	8

ridicule. He was accused of adopting Tony Blair's often calculated use of Estuarine English [Estuary English is a dialect of UK English used around the Thames Estuary] and 'sounding like a chav' as he freely littered his spending round statement with 'wannas, lemme's' and 'gomas'. (Masters 2013)

What Osborne demonstrates in this clip is an example of **downwards convergence**, a form of linguistic **accommodation**. Accommodation explains the ways in which people vary their linguistic styles (including accents) to move closer towards or further from their interlocutors or perceived target audiences. In Osborne's case, the shift he makes is from a prestigious variety to one seen as lower class. Why does he do it? Only Osborne himself could genuinely answer this, but one linguistic reason might be that the public perceptions of RP are as upper class and prestigious, but rather distant. By shifting to a more working class accent, he might be hoping to gain some of the warmer and more relatable qualities of working class speech.

Movements can also take place in the opposite direction (**upwards convergence**) and might be found in situations where it is felt that a more sophisticated or formal style (or even posher accent) might be required. Think about times when you might have used either of these forms of convergence and why you did it. **Divergence** is another aspect of accommodation theory and describes the process of moving speech style away from others. This can signal a desire to maintain social distance from others or be used to exaggerate individual speech characteristics and mark oneself as different in some way, or perhaps proud of a separate identity.

### KEY TERMS

**Downwards convergence:** a speaker's emphasis on the non-standard aspects of their speech emphasising the covert prestige of non-standard forms

**Accommodation:** how people adjust their speech behaviours to match others; this can be aspects of accent, grammar, vocabulary and even the style of speech delivery

**Upwards convergence:** a speaker's emphasis on the standard aspects of their speech emphasising the prestige of standard forms

**Divergence:** when an individual changes their language choices (usually temporarily) to become more dissimilar to another individual or group



## RESEARCH QUESTION

## Social and regional variations in the UK

Use the British Library Sounds Familiar? website to explore and listen to some of the sounds of different social and regional variations in the UK. The section on RP is particularly helpful for explaining the difference between some of the sounds used in social varieties of UK English: [www.cambridge.org/links/escd/v6012](http://www.cambridge.org/links/escd/v6012).

### 2.2.3 Codes: restricted and elaborated

Some of the first writing about language and social class was by the sociologist Basil Bernstein in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He argued that two codes of language existed – restricted and elaborated – and that these codes were used for different functions and by different social classes. While his work has been looked at critically by many linguists since then, his ideas are useful to introduce here. The restricted code tended to use simple grammatical constructions, co-ordination of clauses, more concrete and context-dependent vocabulary, thus relying on an understanding of the situation to make complete sense. Elaborated code had more complex grammatical constructions (in the form of greater use of subordinating conjunctions such as *because* and *if*, for example) and a more abstract vocabulary (more abstract nouns/noun phrases), allowing more chance to theorise and to extrapolate than the restricted code which would generally feature more concrete nouns. The codes were not exclusive to certain social classes but tended to be used differently by those in different occupations (a key factor in classifying social class). Class, therefore, did not necessarily determine the language being used by individuals, but by nature of the very occupations and activities carried out in different classes, had an influence.

### 2.2.4 Class, groups and social networks

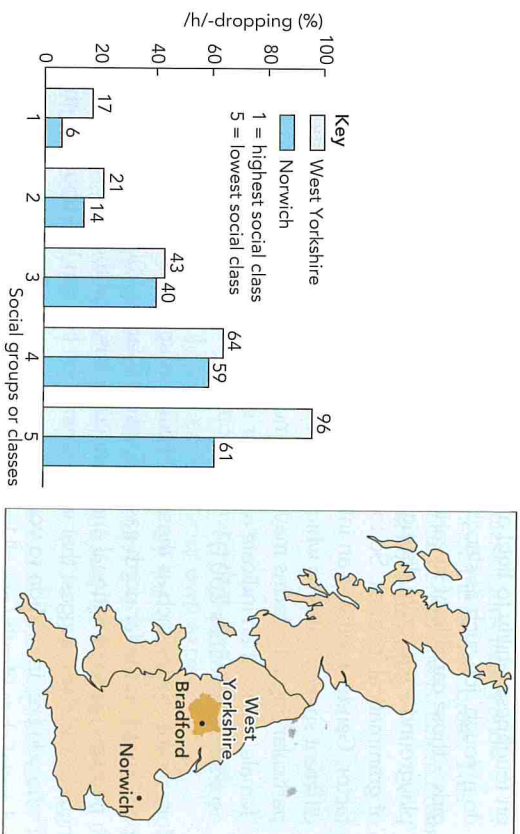
Particular linguistic variables such as how /h/ sounds are produced, or whether an /-in/ or /-ɪŋ/ ending is used on words such as ‘raining’ or ‘singing’, can also be interesting to focus on and tell us something about the links between social class and language use, as well as perceptions of language use.

Peter Trudgill’s 1968 study of the -in/-ɪŋ variable in Norwich suggested that the sound was produced differently depending on the social class the speaker belonged to (with much more use of the non-standard, regional -in form among the lower working class than middle-class speakers) but that other factors were important too. The nature of the context – whether it was casual conversation, or being asked to read word lists – along with the gender of the respondent

(more males than females using the non-standard -in form) were also important, showing that while class is clearly a factor in language use, it is part of a wider range of variables.

Malcolm Petry’s 1985 study of h-dropping (not pronouncing the /h/ sound at the start of words such as ‘hat’ or ‘house’) showed a similar link between class and a linguistic variable associated with non-standard pronunciation (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: /h/-dropping in Norwich and West Yorkshire social groups



A sense of belonging to a group can also be a major factor in how people use language. The work of Milroy and Milroy in the north of Ireland (1978) identified what they termed social networks and their importance to language use. Networks are patterns of connections that individuals have to others in their community and beyond.

The more tightly knit the network structure, and the more integrated an individual is into the group, the stronger the impetus to adhere to the group’s accepted norms of behaviour. In Western societies strong tight-knit networks can be found in traditional ‘working-class’ communities. People tend to live, work and socialise in a compact setting. More middle-class communities tend to be characterised by looser network structures, with greater mobility for work, leisure and housing. Strong networks promote the maintenance of local linguistic features while looser networks are conduits for linguistic change. (Foulkes and Docherty 2007)

So, along with membership of a particular social class, a person’s connections to others within that class and those outside it have a clear influence on how



language might be used, whether it is the pronunciation of a specific sound, use of a lexical item (a word or phrase), or a grammatical structure. In her Reading study (1982), Jenny Cheshire identified a range of vernacular (non-standard) features, such as multiple negation ('I never did nothing') or non-standard past tense ('I come down here yesterday') that were used by the teenagers she was studying. She found that differences were at least partly down to the social groups the young people were part of, but also their gender.

Overall boys used vernacular forms more frequently than girls did. The boys who used the most vernacular forms had the highest score on a scale based on toughness (ability to fight and steal), peer group status, and ambition to do a 'tough' job such as slaughtering. But interestingly the speech of tough girls – those capable of swearing, stealing or setting fire to the adventure playground – was quite distinguishable from that of the boys on a number of grammatical features. So toughness was here not the distinguishing factor. Gender itself was an influential explanatory factor accounting for different speech patterns which were observed. In these communities, particular linguistic forms may signal membership of the group 'male' or 'female' rather than indicate a speaker's social class background or social aspirations. (Holmes 2001)

More recent studies such as those in Middlesbrough (Llamas 2000) and Berwick-upon-Tweed, in the far north-east of England (Llamas 2006), which focus on people's sense of national and regional identity and their use of particular linguistic variables, suggest that while *where* you live can be important, the sense of who you are, in relation to your peers, your regional and national background and social class identity are all key factors in language use too. In the words of Ian Brown, singer of the influential 1990s Manchester band, The Stone Roses, 'it's not where you're from; it's where you're at'.

## 2.3 Parallel lives: slang and occupational English

When groups of people get together, language is used in different ways: generally, to communicate ideas from one to another and to perform social roles. The language itself is also shaped by the nature of the group and what develops is often influenced by the ways in which the individuals in the group interact and the contexts they operate within. For example, a group of soldiers working in close proximity to each other in a hostile environment are likely to build up a shared set of reference points based on their relationships and duties, and are also likely to have some quite specialised lexis to refer to the tools of their trade. This is the same within any occupational group, be it plumbers, care workers, lawyers or dentists. At the same time, while the vocabulary is a fairly

obvious feature of many groups' language, other elements contribute to their shared **repertoire**.

### KEY TERM

**Repertoire:** a range of language features available for speakers to choose from

In the military, there are certain expectations about the nature of interactions that take place between different ranks, so the rules of turn-taking and interaction are different from those that exist outside the armed forces. This might link to the nature of some of the grammatical constructions, where orders are likely to be imperative in form (and commanding in function).

### ACTIVITY 2.3

#### Occupational English

Think about three or four occupational groups that you have come across, either through family connections, your own experience or some other knowledge of their work. What are the characteristic features of the language used by these groups and how would you categorise these features into different areas such as their vocabulary and interactional styles?

These ideas link back to the work earlier in this chapter on discourse communities. The armed forces are a good example of how a discourse community operates, matching the key descriptors that Swales suggested (section 2.1.2).

Alongside the specialist, occupational language used within this group, other forms of language might also arise. As Coleman points out in *The Life of Slang* (2012), the conditions within the military are a perfect breeding ground for slang as well.

Slang is a form of language that many people will recognise but few will be able to define very clearly. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a number of definitions, but the two most relevant for the focus here are:

1b: The special vocabulary or phraseology of a particular calling or profession; the cant or jargon of a certain class or period.

1c: Language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense.



Here, the overlap between occupational language and the very informal language of particular social groups is a little muddled. In recent years, the latter definition (1c) has tended to be the more popular way of defining slang, and it is clear from this definition that part of what makes slang 'slang' is its informality and 'lower level' communication. Slang therefore seems to be something quite different from the occupational lexis described earlier, fulfilling a different set of functions. If occupational language is all about doing the job and using language to do that job effectively and smoothly, then slang is an expression of how you feel about your job and how you wish to present yourself as an individual within that group. It runs parallel to the occupational discourse but underneath it, in terms of its formality and appropriacy.

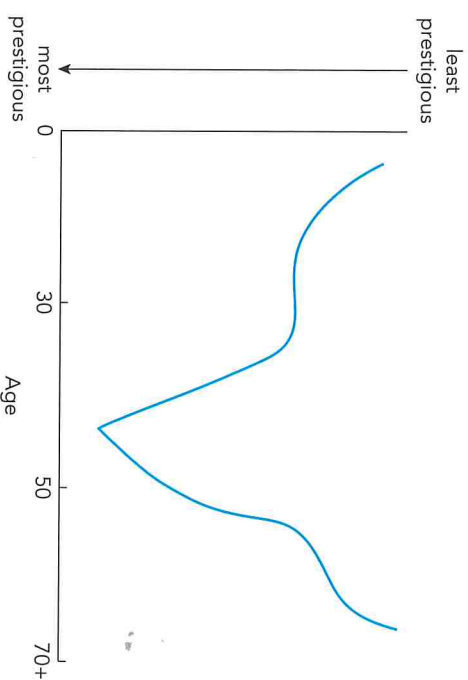
In the case of the military, Coleman points out that a compelling set of conditions exists for the creation and diffusion of slang:

- A heightened desire for self-expression ('Where all individuality is stripped away by uniforms, regulation haircuts and the necessity of obeying orders without question, the desire to identify oneself as a separate human being becomes problematic.')
  - Slang speakers are lower in the hierarchy ('In a military setting, all behavior that is potentially threatening to the hierarchy is carefully monitored, and infringements of the rules are sometimes brutally punished, but slang offers the possibility for minor rebellion that won't usually meet with serious consequences.')
  - A sense of group identity ('Living under shared circumstances of inferiority and uniformity, individuals will use slang among themselves to heighten their sense of solidarity.')
  - A sense that their position is unfair or unreasonable ('Oppressed groups at the bottom of hierarchies are denied their individuality in many settings, but the conditions for slang development are best where individuals collectively resist the forces acting upon them by means short of physical violence.')
- (Quotations from Coleman 2012)

It is not just the military where slang thrives. If most of the conditions outlined above are met in different settings, slang can develop. Prisoners, boarding school pupils, criminal gangs, doctors and journalists all develop their own slangs, as do many other groups, occupational or otherwise. Such slang is often completely alien to outsiders and for good reason. If the general public heard how some doctors referred to some of their patients in less than flattering terms they might be horrified. For example, 'Crinkly' = a geriatric, elderly patient, 'Frequent Flyer' = someone who is well known to doctors as being in hospital for dubious reasons, 'Blue Bloater' = an obese person suffering respiratory failure, or 'FLK' = Funny Looking Kid. However, there are many terms equally critical of others within the profession, so in some respects this kind of slang is equal opportunities in its targets.

Youth slang is one area that has often attracted considerable interest outside linguistic circles, because of its constantly changing nature. As a social group, young people are clearly very varied, with many sub-groups within the broader group, but some patterns of age-related language use can still be seen.

Figure 2.2: Relationship between age and use of 'prestige' forms



In Figure 2.2, the graph would suggest that young people are the main users of vernacular forms of language, that their speech becomes more standard as they approach adulthood and middle age, before it tails off and becomes non-standard again as they approach later life.

There is something inevitable in younger generations developing their own way of talking and writing, because it is something that has happened for centuries, and the desire to create a new identity – separate from parents and their lifestyles and values – is a natural stage of adolescent development. As we have seen in this chapter, language does so much more than communicate transactional information, so it is hardly surprising that it can be used by young people to signal their membership of a different age group and delineate their territory against that of their parents.

#### ACTIVITY 2.4

##### Teenage outrage

Examine the headlines in Text 2C, which are taken from a range of different articles from the Mail Online, a UK newspaper, reporting on teenage slang. What are the main patterns that you notice in the descriptions of this language and the users of it?



'It's thug life imit': Confused parents confess they are baffled by the language their teenage sons use

"Snow" is drugs and "salad" equals sex: Do you have any idea what the words in your teenagers' texts mean?

PIR (Parent In Room), IPN (I'm Posting Naked) and WTTTP (Want To Trade Photos): The 28 internet acronyms EVERY parent needs to look out for

Don't let your kids GNOCI! Parents warned about teen sexting codes

The teens who can barely talk – they only have an 800-word vocabulary

Figure 2.3: Good advice for teenagers?

<p><b>TEENAGERS</b></p> <p>Tired of being harassed by your parents?</p> <p><b>ACT NOW!</b></p> <p>Move out, get a job, &amp; pay your own way.</p> <p><b>QUICK!</b></p> <p>While you still know everything!</p>
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**PRACTICE QUESTION**

The influence of social groups on use of language  
 Discuss the idea that the social groups people belong to have an influence on the ways in which they use language.

**Wider reading**

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

**Diversity and language**

Holmes, J. and Wilson, N. (2017) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Fifth edition). London: Routledge.

**Language used by different social groups**

Coleman, J. (2012) *The Life of Slang*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dent, S. (2016) *Modern Tribes: The Secret Languages of Britain*. London: John Murray.