5 Speech Communities

Language is both an individual possession and a social possession. We would expect, therefore, that certain individuals would behave linguistically like other individuals: they might be said to speak the same language or the same dialect or the same variety, i.e., to employ the same code, and in that respect to be members of the same *speech community*, a term probably derived from the German *Sprachgemeinschaft*. Indeed, much work in sociolinguistics is based on the assumption that it is possible to use the concept of 'speech community' without much difficulty. Hudson (1996, p. 29) rejects that view: 'our sociolinguistic world is not organized in terms of objective "speech communities," even though we like to think subjectively in terms of communities or social types such as "Londoner" and "American." This means that the search for a "true" definition of the speech community, or for the "true" boundaries around some speech community, is just a wild goose chase.' We will indeed discover that just as it is difficult to define such terms as *language, dialect,* and *variety,* it is also difficult to define *speech community,* and for many of the same reasons. However, we must try to do so if we share Labov's belief (see p. 3) that 'the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to.' The concept has proved to be invaluable in sociolinguistic work in spite of a certain 'fuzziness' as to its precise characteristics. It remains so even if we decide that a speech community is no more than some kind of social group whose speech characteristics are of interest and can be described in a coherent manner.

Definitions

Sociolinguistics is the study of language use within or among groups of speakers. What are groups? 'Group' is a difficult concept to define but one we must try to grasp. For our purposes, a group must have at least two members but there is really no upper limit to group membership. People can group together for one or more reasons: social, religious, political, cultural, familial, vocational,

avocational, etc. The group may be temporary or quasi-permanent and the purposes of its members may change, i.e., its *raison d'être*. A group also may be more than its members for individuals may come and go. They may also belong to other groups and may or may not even meet face-to-face. The organization of the group may be tight or loose and the importance of group membership is likely to vary among individuals within the group, being extemely important to some and of little consequence to others. An individual's feelings of identity are closely related to that person's feelings about groups in which he or she is or is not a member, feels strong (or weak) commitment (or rejection), and finds some kind of success (or failure.) At the same time, as Richards (2006, p. 7) says, 'group identity is neither more nor less problematic than individual identity; both have to be worked for by participants and the same analytical procedures can be used to expose the processes by which they are established.'

We must also be aware that the groups we refer to in various research studies are groups we have created for the purposes of our research using this or that set of factors. They are useful and necessary constructs but we would be unwise to forget that each such group comprises a set of unique individuals each with a complex identity (or, better still, identities). Consequently, we must be careful in drawing conclusions about individuals on the basis of observations we make about groups that we have defined for our research purposes. Furthermore, to say of any member of such a group that he or she will always exhibit a certain characteristic behavior is to offer a *stereotype*. Individuals can surprise us in many ways.

The kind of group that sociolinguists have generally attempted to study is called the *speech community.* (See Patrick, 2002, for a general survey.) For purely theoretical purposes, some linguists have hypothesized the existence of an 'ideal' speech community. This is actually what Chomsky (1965, pp. 3–4) proposes, his 'completely homogeneous speech-community' (see p. 3). However, such a speech community cannot be our concern: it is a theoretical construct employed for a narrow purpose. Our speech communities, whatever they are, exist in a 'real' world. Consequently, we must try to find some alternative view of speech community, one helpful to investigations of language in society rather than necessitated by abstract linguistic theorizing.

Lyons (1970, p. 326) offers a definition of what he calls a 'real' speech community: 'all the people who use a given language (or dialect).' However, that really shifts the issue to making the definition of a language (or of a dialect) also the definition of a speech community. If, as we saw in chapter 2, it proves virtually impossible to define *language* and *dialect* clearly and unambiguously, then we have achieved nothing. It is really quite easy to demonstrate that a speech community is not coterminous with a language: while the English language is spoken in many places throughout the world, we must certainly recognize that it is also spoken in a wide variety of ways, in speech communities that are almost entirely isolated from one another, e.g., in South Africa, in New Zealand, and among expatriates in China. We must ask ourselves in what sense

does this modern lingua franca produce a speech community that might be of interest to us, i.e., ask what else is shared than the very language itself. Alternatively, a recognizably single speech community can employ more than one language: Switzerland, Canada, Papua New Guinea, many African states, and New York City.

Furthermore, if speech communities are defined solely by their linguistic characteristics, we must acknowledge the inherent circularity of any such definition in that language itself is a communal possession. We must also acknowledge that using linguistic characteristics alone to determine what is or is not a speech community has proved so far to be quite impossible because people do not necessarily feel any such direct relationship between linguistic characteristics A, B, C, and so on, and speech community X. What we can be sure of is that speakers do use linguistic characteristics to achieve group identity with, and group differentiation from, other speakers, but they use other characteristics as well: social, cultural, political and ethnic, to name a few. Referring to what they call *speech markers*, Giles et al. (1979, p. 351) say:

> through speech markers functionally important social categorizations are discriminated, and . . . these have important implications for social organization. For humans, speech markers have clear parallels . . . it is evident that social categories of age, sex, ethnicity, social class, and situation can be clearly marked on the basis of speech, and that such categorization is fundamental to social organization even though many of the categories are also easily discriminated on other bases.

Our search must be for criteria other than, or at least in addition to, linguistic criteria if we are to gain a useful understanding of 'speech community.'

For very specific sociolinguistic purposes we might want to try to draw quite narrow and extremely precise bounds around what we consider to be a speech community. We might require that only a single language be spoken (and employ a very restrictive definition of language in doing so), and that the speakers in the community share some kind of common feeling about linguistic behavior in the community, that is, observe certain linguistic norms. This appeal to norms forms an essential part of Labov's definition of speech community (1972b, pp. 120–1):

> The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage.

This definition shifts the emphasis away from an exclusive use of linguistic criteria to a search for the various characteristics which make individuals feel that they are members of the same community. Milroy (1987a, p. 13) has indicated some consequences of such a view:

Exploration 5.1: Judgments Again

How do you judge each of the following usages: acceptable, unacceptable, or maybe? Then ask yourself why you respond that way, i.e., what are you actually responding to? Some regional or social-class difference that you believe exists? Something you have been told by others? Etc. In other words, try to figure out a basis for your judgment (and your willingness to judge). If others disagree with you, what arguments would you be prepared to advance to support your views? Who – or what – should be the final arbiter?

Each of the following pronunciations of the first (conventionally spelled) word:

butter, budder, bu'er; fishing, fishin'; farm, fahm; Cuba, Cuber; ate, et; mischievous, mischievious; aluminum, aluminium.

Pronunciations of *pólice, gúitar, and Détroit* with the accent on the first syllable.

Various pronunciations of *Birmingham, Tuesday, and February.*

Each of the following utterances:

1. He hurt hisself. 2. She done it. 3. The boy run away last week. 4. It looks like it's going to rain. 5. To whom did you give it? 6. She's taller than me now. 7. They ain't got no money left. 8. Try and do it soon. 9. Can I leave the room now? 10. Between you and me, I don't like it. 11. There's twenty dollars for you to spend. 12. She invited Sally and I to the party. 13. You done it, did you? 14. Stand over there by them boys. 15. Most everyone says that. 16. May I go now? 17. It is I. 18. She ain't done yet. 19. Lay down, Fido! 20. Sally dove in at the deep end. 21. She gave it him. 22. Have they any childen? 23. He was the one what did it. 24. They got off of the train. 25. That'll learn you!

Thus, all New York speakers from the highest to lowest status are said to constitute a single speech community because, for example, they agree in viewing presence of post vocalic [r] as prestigious. They also agree on the social value of a large number of other linguistic elements. Southern British English speakers cannot be said to belong to the same speech community as New Yorkers, since they do not attach the same social meanings to, for example, (r): on the contrary, the highest prestige accent in Southern England (RP) is non-rhotic. Yet, the Southern British speech community may be said to be united by a common

evaluation of the variable (h); *h*-dropping is stigmatized in Southern England . . . but is irrelevant in New York City or, for that matter, in Glasgow or Belfast.

In this sense, 'speech community' is a very abstract concept because the particular norms that a community uses may or may not be exclusively linguistic in nature, and even the linguistic norms themselves may vary considerably among small sub-groups. For example, speakers of Hindi will separate themselves entirely from speakers of Urdu; most Ukrainians will separate themselves from most Russians (but possibly not vice versa); and most Chinese will see themselves as members of the same community as all other Chinese, even though speakers of Cantonese or Hokkien might not be able to express that sense of community to a speaker of Mandarin or to each other except through their shared writing system.

The single-language, or single-variety, criterion is also a very dubious one. Gumperz (1971, p. 101) points out that 'there are no *a priori* grounds which force us to define speech communities so that all members speak the same language.' As I observed in the previous chapter, many societies have existed and still exist in which bilingualism and multilingualism are normal. For example, early in the year 2000 London was judged to be the most 'international' of all cities in the world based on the number of different languages spoken there – over 300. It is such considerations as these which lead Gumperz (p. 101) to use the term *linguistic community* rather than speech community. He proceeds to define that term as follows:

> a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication. Linguistic communities may consist of small groups bound together by face-to-face contact or may cover large regions, depending on the level of abstraction we wish to achieve.

In this definition, then, communities are defined partially through their relationships with other communities. Internally, a community must have a certain social cohesiveness; externally, its members must find themselves cut off from other communities in certain ways. The factors that bring about cohesion and differentiation will vary considerably from occasion to occasion. Individuals will therefore shift their sense of community as different factors come into play. Such a definition is an extension of the one that Bloomfield (1933, p. 42) uses to open his chapter on speech communities: 'a speech community is a group of people who interact by means of speech.' The extension is provided by the insistence that a group or community is defined not only by what it is but by what it is not: the 'cut-off' criterion.

Gumperz (1971, p. 114) offers another definition of the speech community:

> any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage.

Most groups of any permanence, be they small bands bounded by face-to-face contact, modern nations divisible into smaller subregions, or even occupational associations or neighborhood gangs, may be treated as speech communities, provided they show linguistic peculiarities that warrant special study.

Not only must members of the speech community share a set of grammatical rules, but there must also be regular relationships between language use and social structure; i.e., there must be norms which may vary by sub-group and social setting. Gumperz adds (p. 115):

> Wherever the relationships between language choice and rules of social appropriateness can be formalized, they allow us to group relevant linguistic forms into distinct dialects, styles, and occupational or other special parlances. The sociolinguistic study of speech communities deals with the linguistic similarities and differences among these speech varieties.

Furthermore, 'the speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms' (p. 116). Such norms, however, may overlap what we must regard as clear language boundaries. For example, in Eastern Europe many speakers of Czech, Austrian German, and Hungarian share rules about the proper forms of greetings, suitable topics for conversation, and how to pursue these, but no common language. They are united in a *Sprachbund*, 'speech area,' not quite a 'speech community,' but still a community defined in some way by speech. As we can see, then, trying to define the concept of 'speech community' requires us to come to grips with definitions of other concepts, principally 'group,' 'language' (or 'variety'), and 'norm.'

Hymes (1974, p. 47) disagrees with both Chomsky's and Bloomfield's definitions of a speech community. He claims that these simply reduce the notion of speech community to that of a language and, in effect, throw out 'speech community' as a worthwhile concept. He points out that it is impossible to equate language and speech community when we lack a clear understanding of the nature of language. He insists that speech communities cannot be defined solely through the use of linguistic criteria (p. 123). The way in which people view the language they speak is also important, that is, how they evaluate accents; how they establish the fact that they speak one language rather than another; and how they maintain language boundaries. Moreover, rules for using a language may be just as important as feelings about the language itself. He cites the example of the Ngoni of Africa. Most Ngoni no longer speak their ancestral language but use the language of the people they conquered in Malawi. However, they use that language in ways they have carried over from Ngoni, ways they maintain because they consider them to be essential to their continued identity as a separate people. Hymes adds that analogous situations may be observed among some native groups in North America: they use English in special ways to

maintain their separate identities within the dominant English-speaking community. As we saw too in the previous chapter, code-switching can be used to achieve a shared identity and delimit a group of speakers from all others.

For Hymes, the concept of 'speech community' is a difficult one to grasp in its entirety, for it depends on how one defines 'groups' in society. He also distinguishes (pp. 50–1) between participating in a speech community and being a fully fledged member of that community:

> To participate in a speech community is not quite the same as to be a member of it. Here we encounter the limitation of any conception of speech community in terms of knowledge alone, even knowledge of patterns of speaking as well as of grammar, and of course, of any definition in terms of interaction alone. Just the matter of accent may erect a barrier between participation and membership in one case, although be ignored in another. Obviously membership in a community depends upon criteria which in the given case may not even saliently involve language and speaking, as when birthright is considered indelible.

However, he reaffirms (p. 51) an earlier (1962, pp. 30–2) definition of speech community: 'a local unit, characterized for its members by common locality and primary interaction.' He is prepared to 'admit exceptions cautiously.'

Brown and Levinson (1979, pp. 298–9) point out that:

> Social scientists use the word 'group' in so many ways, as for example in the phrases *small group*, *reference group*, *corporate group*, *ethnic group*, *interest group*, that we are unlikely to find any common core that means more than 'set'. Social scientists who adopt the weak concept of structure . . . are likely to think of groups in relatively concrete terms, as independently isolable units of social structure. . . . On the other hand, social theorists who adopt the stronger concept of structure are more likely to think of groups as relative concepts, each group being a unit that is relevant only in relation to units of like size that for immediate purposes are contrasted with it. Thus for a man who lives in Cambridge, his territorial identification will be with Cambridge when contrasted with Newmarket, with Cambridgeshire when contrasted with Lancashire, with England when contrasted with Scotland, with the United Kingdom when contrasted with Germany, and so on.

'Group' is therefore a relative concept and 'speech community' must also be relative. You are a member of one speech community by virtue of the fact that on a particular occasion you identify with X rather than with Y when apparently X and Y contrast in a single dimension. This approach would suggest that there is an English speech community (because there are French and German ones), a Texas speech community (because there are London and Bostonian ones), a Harvard speech community (because there are Oxford and Berkeley ones), a Chicano speech community (because there are Spanish and English ones), and so on. Or a speech community with a single language can actually be a mosaic of small speech communities. As Hymes says (1974, p. 123):

Exploration 5.2: Registers

I have called the language of a group brought together by a special interest a 'register.' It is time to look at some of these registers and there are many possible ways of doing this.

Look at professional or trade publications, fashion magazines, men's or women's magazines, cookbooks, instruction manuals, gossip magazines, etc. The choice is almost endless. Listen to the working language of a group, e.g., mechanics, air traffic controllers, dispatchers, computer technicians, disk jockeys, marriage counselors, physicians, sports commentators, etc. Again almost endless. Consider also how your own language changes as you move from group to group and activity to activity.

There will be differences in all of the above: vocabulary, grammar, and manner of speaking. Concentrate on providing a close account of several characteristics of a register.

Any enduring social relationship or group may come to define itself by selection and/or creation of linguistic features, and a difference of accent may be as important at one boundary as a difference of grammar at another. Part of the creativity of users of languages lies in the freedom to determine what and how much linguistic difference matters.

An individual therefore belongs to various speech communities at the same time, but on any particular occasion will identify with only one of them, the particular identification depending on what is especially important or contrastive in the circumstances. For any specific speech community, the concept 'reflects what people do and know when they interact with one another. It assumes that when people come together through discursive practices, they behave as though they operate within a shared set of norms, local knowledge, beliefs, and values. It means that they are aware of these things and capable of knowing when they are being adhered to and when the values of the community are being ignored . . . it is fundamental in understanding identity and representation of ideology' (Morgan, 2001, p. 31).

Finally, the problem of defining a speech community also arises in a particularly interesting way in ethnographic work, as we will see in chapter 10. In this case it is because the observer becomes part of the community being studied and is, therefore, a *participant-observer*, so essentially creating a different community from that which is technically under observation. Can you truly be both participant and observer at the same time? I will have more to say on this issue later (pp. 155–6).

Intersecting Communities

The fact that people do use expressions such as *New York speech*, *London speech*, and *South African speech* indicates that they have some idea of how a 'typical' person from each place speaks, that is, of what it is like to be a member of a particular speech community somewhat loosely defined. Such a person may be said to be typical by virtue of observing the linguistic norms one associates with the particular place in question. But just what are these norms? Rosen (1980, pp. 56–7) has indicated some of the problems you find in trying to call a city like London a speech community and in describing exactly what characterizes its speech. He says that such cities 'cannot be thought of as linguistic patchwork maps, ghetto after ghetto, not only because languages and dialects have no simple geographical distribution but also because interaction between them blurs whatever boundaries might be drawn. Both a geographical model and a social class model would be false, though each could contribute to an under-standing.' In such places, 'dialects and languages are beginning to influence each other. Urbanization is a great eroder of linguistic frontiers.' The result is:

> the creation of thousands of bilingual and to a certain extent bidialectal speakers
> on a scale and of a diversity unprecedented in our history. Which dialect of English
> they learn depends in the main on their social class position in this country. It is
> common practice to talk of the 'target language' of a second-language learner. In
> London it will be a moving target, though undoubtedly most by virtue of their social
> position will have as their chief model London working-class speech.

London is a community in some senses but not in others; however, with its 300 languages or more it is in no sense a single speech community (see Baker and Eversley, 2000). It is just too big and fragmented. On the other hand, if we say it must be a composite of small speech communities, we may not be any better off. Are these smaller communities geographical, social, ethnic, religious, or occupational in orientation? That is, how do any linguistic factors we might isolate relate to such social factors? Are the communities static or fluid? If they are static, how do they maintain themselves, and if they are fluid, what inferences must we draw concerning any concept we might have of 'speech com-munity'? Are their boundaries strong and clear or are they weak and permeable? Moreover, London is no different from most large cities anywhere in the world, a world which is increasingly a world of large cities, heterogeneously populated. As Coupland (2007, pp. 2–3) says: 'Cities challenge the view that one discrete social style (e.g., a dialect) is associated with one place, which was the basic assumption in the analysis of rural dialects.'

We can easily see how difficult it is to relate the concept of 'speech com-munity' directly to language or languages spoken and even to groups and norms

if we refer back to the linguistic situation among the Tukano described in the previous chapter (p. 94). In that situation, which requires one to take as a marriage partner someone who speaks an entirely different language and furthermore requires the female to join the male's household, multilingualism is endemic and normal. However, each residential community has its unique multi-lingual mix and no language equates in distribution to a specific residential community. Such a situation is not unique. Many other parts of the world would have some of the same multilingual characteristics; e.g., the Balkans, large areas of the Indian subcontinent, and Papua New Guinea. Equating language to com-munity is perhaps most easily seen in certain modern states which have insisted that language be used to express some concept of 'nationhood' and, in doing so, have tried to standardize and promote a particular language (or particular languages) at the expense of competitors. But such solutions are not always lasting or uncontroversial, as we can see in countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, all of which have recently had to acknowledge in one way or another the presence of people who do not speak the standard variety (or varieties) but who are, nevertheless, very much part of the larger communities.

Perhaps the concept of 'speech community' is less useful than it might be and we should return to the concept of 'group' as any set of individuals united for a common end, that end being quite distinct from ends pursued by other groups. Consequently, a person may belong at any one time to many different groups depending on the particular ends in view.

We can illustrate this approach as follows. At home, a person may live in a bilingual setting and switch easily back and forth between two languages. She – let this be a female person – may shop in one of the languages but work in the other. Her accent in one of the languages may indicate that she can be classified as an immigrant to the society in which she lives, an immigrant, moreover, from a specific country. Her accent in the other language shows her to be a native of region Y in country Z. Outside country Z, however, as she now is, she regards herself (and others from Z agree with her) as speaking not a Y variety of Z but as speaking Z itself. She may also have had extensive technical training in her new country and in her second language and be quite unable to use her first language in work related to this specialty. In the course of the day, she will switch her identification from one group to another, possibly even, as we saw in the preceding chapter, in the course of a single utterance. She belongs to one group at one moment and to a different one at another. But to how many altogether?

The concept must be flexible because individuals find it advantageous to shift their identities quite freely. As Bolinger (1975, p. 333) says,

> There is no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together
> for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship, or any of the other
> purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number
> and variety of speech communities that are to be found in a society.

Exploration 5.3: Shared Words

The 'promotional' literature of various organizations tries to induce or persuade you to join a community: a church, a club, a social organization, a health or self-improvement regime of one kind or another, etc. Look at the kinds of language that are used to tempt you. You might like to compare such attempts from two different groups, possibly very different ones, in order to see what kinds of language are used and what possible commonalities there are. Note that in each case you are being asked to join a community in which the members have some kind of common 'identity.' In particular, you should focus on issues of identity, of individual and group identity, and how the promotional material addresses these issues.

Saville-Troike (1996, p. 357) places even more importance on the need for individuals to identify themselves with various others but her views are essentially the same as those of Bolinger: 'Individuals may belong to several speech communities (which may be discrete or overlapping), just as they may participate in a variety of social settings. Which one or ones individuals orient themselves to at any given moment – which set of social and communicative rules they use – is part of the strategy of communication. To understand this phenomenon, one must recognize that each member of a community has a repertoire of social identities and that each identity in a given context is associated with a number of appropriate verbal and nonverbal forms of expression.'

A very interesting variant of this notion is the idea that speakers participate in various *communities of practice*. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998, p. 490) define a community of practice as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagements 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 at the same time its members and what its members are doing to make them a community: a group of workers in a factory, an extended family, an adolescent gang, a women's fitness group, a classroom, etc. They add (p. 490): 'Rather than seeing the individual as some disconnected entity floating around in social space, or as a location in a network, or as a member of a particular group or set of groups, or as a bundle of social characteristics, we need to focus on communities of practice.' (See Meyerhoff, 2002, particularly pp. 527–30, for additional details.) It is such communities of practice that shape individuals, provide them with their identities, and often circumscribe what they can do. Eckert used this concept in her research in a Detroit-area high school (see pp. 218–19), and Mendoza-Denton (2008) also used it in her work with groups of Latina girls in California (see p. 263).

If there is no limit to the ways in which individuals can classify themselves and if speakers must constantly create and recreate social identities for themselves, then it may also be impossible to predict with certainty which group or community any individual will consider himself or herself to belong to at a particular moment. Groups and communities themselves are also ever changing, their boundaries are often porous, and internal relationships shift. They must constantly reinvent and recreate themselves. Today's middle class, youth, New Yorkers, women, immigrants, etc. are not yesterday's nor will they be tomorrow's. The group chosen to identify with will also change according to situation: at one moment religion may be important; at another, regional origin; and at still another, perhaps membership in a particular profession or social class. An individual may also attempt to bond with others because all possess a set of characteristics, or even just a single characteristic, e.g., be of the same gender, or even because all lack a certain characteristic, e.g., not be of white skin color. The bonding can therefore be positive, as when the individuals share some feature or features, or negative, as when the individuals lack some feature or features. Language bonding appears to be no different. In one case command of a particular dialect or language may be a potent marker and, therefore, help create a sense of community and solidarity with others, e.g., an expatriate group of Americans; in another case the lack of such command may exclude you from a community of speakers and mark you in a very different way, e.g., as not being a user of RP, or of AAE. However, even sharing the same dialect might be of no significance: if the circumstances require you to discuss astrophysics and you lack the language of astrophysics, you will not be able to enter the community of astrophysicists. Speakers of Yoruba may also find themselves with speakers of Japanese and Arabic within an English-speaking foreign-student speech community at a North American or European university.

Each individual therefore is a member of many different groups. It is in the best interests of most people to be able to identify themselves on one occasion as members of one group and on another as members of another group. Such groups also may or may not overlap. One of the consequences of the intersecting identifications is, of course, linguistic variation: people do not speak alike, nor does any individual always speak in the same way on every occasion. The variation we see in language must partly reflect a need that people have to be seen as the same as certain other people on some occasions and as different from them on other occasions.

Networks and Repertoires

Another way of viewing how an individual relates to other individuals in society is to ask what *networks* he or she participates in. That is, how and on what occasions does a specific individual A interact now with B, then with C,
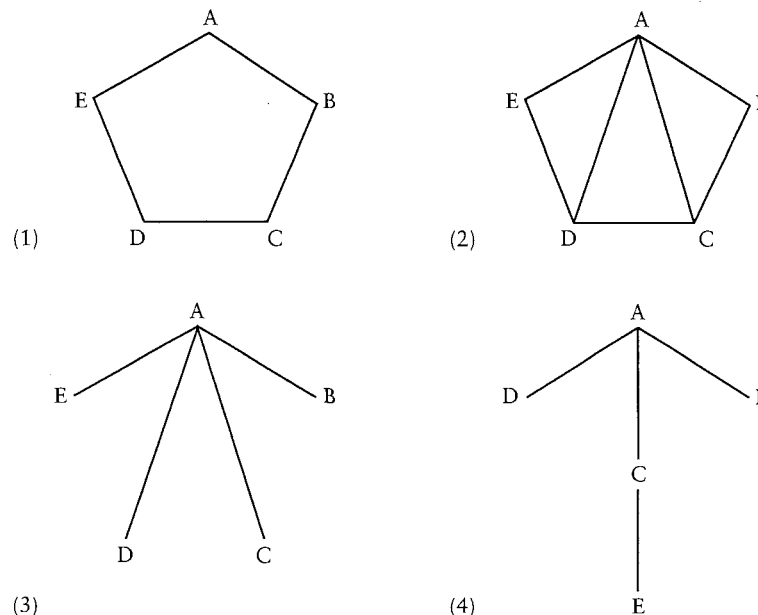
Figure 5.1 Simple network relationships

and then again with D? How intensive are the various relationships: does A inter-
act more frequently with B than with C or D? How extensive is A's relationship
with B in the sense of how many other individuals interact with both A and B
in whatever activity brings them together? If, in a situation in which A, B, C,
D, and E are linked in a network, as in figure 5.1, are they all equally linked as
in (1) in that illustration; strongly linked but with the link through A predom-
inant, as in (2); weakly linked, with the link to A providing all the connections,
as in (3); or, as in (4), is the link from A to E achieved through C?

You are said to be involved in a *dense* network if the people you know and
interact with also know and interact with one another. If they do not the net-
work is a *loose* one. You are also said to be involved in a *multiplex* network if
the people within it are tied together in more than one way, i.e., not just through
work but also through other social activities. People who go to school together,
marry each other's siblings, and work and play together participate in dense
multiplex networks. In England these are said to be found at the extremes of
the social-class structure. Such networks indicate strong social cohesion, produce
feelings of solidarity, and encourage individuals to identify with others within
the network. On the other hand, middle-class networks are likely to be loose

and simplex; therefore, social cohesion is reduced and there are weaker feelings
of solidarity and identity.

Using the example of what he calls a 'hypothetical government functionary' in
Belgium, Fishman (1972a) explains how topic and domain influence linguistic
choice. The domain may be social, cultural, or psychological in nature and
will involve a consideration of such matters as role relationships and locales.
Fishman offers the following account of the linguistic behavior of his functionary
(p. 16):

> A government functionary in Brussels arrives home after stopping off at his club
> for a drink. He *generally* speaks standard French in his office, standard Dutch at
> his club, and a distinctly local variant of Flemish at home. In each instance he identifies
> himself with a different speech network to which he belongs, wants to belong, and
> from which he seeks acceptance. All of these networks – and more – are included
> in his overarching speech community, even though each is more commonly
> associated with one variety than with another. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to
> find occasions at the office in which he speaks or is spoken to in one or another
> variety of Flemish. There are also occasions at the club when he speaks or is addressed
> in French; finally, there are occasions at home when he communicates in standard
> Dutch or even French.

Most of us do not live such complicated linguistic lives but all of us participate
in social networks of various kinds. Social networks are not fixed; they change.
People also belong to different networks of different strengths. The recent
availability of computers and various kinds of hand-held wireless devices has
produced entirely new types of networking which many young people now use
extensively.

Dubois and Horvath (1999, p. 307) acknowledge that while the concept of
social networks seems to be useful in studying language behavior in urban
settings, its effectiveness in nonurban settings, in their case among English–
French bilingual Cajuns in rural Louisiana, is not so clear. They say: 'The notion
of network is strongly conditioned by the effects of scale and place. Being
a member of an open or closed network is quite different if you live in New
Orleans . . . , Lafayette . . . , Eunice . . . , or Iota. . . . We do not wish to imply that
the notion of network loses its methodological importance in nonurban settings,
but only that the linguistic effect of closed and open networks is intimately related
to the type of community under study.'

Much linguistic behavior seems explicable in terms of network structure and
we will see in chapters 7 and 8 how valuable the concept of 'social network' is
when we consider matters of language variation and change (see Milroy, 2002,
for additional details). Milroy and Gordon (2003, p. 119) also point out that
the 'concepts of network and community of practice are . . . closely related, and
the differences between them are chiefly method and focus. Network analysis
typically deals with structural and content properties of the ties that constitute
egocentric personal networks . . . [but] cannot address the issues of how and where

linguistic variants are employed . . . to construct local social meanings. Rather, it is concerned with how informal social groups . . . support local norms or . . . facilitate linguistic change.'

It is quite apparent that no two individuals are exactly alike in their linguistic capabilities, just as no two social situations are exactly alike. People are separated from one another by fine gradations of social class, regional origin, and occupation; by factors such as religion, gender, nationality, and ethnicity; by psychological differences such as particular kinds of linguistic skills, e.g., verbality or literacy; and by personality characteristics. These are but some of the more obvious differences that affect individual variation in speech.

An individual also has a *speech repertoire*; that is, he or she controls a number of varieties of a language or of two or more languages. Quite often, many individuals will have virtually identical repertoires. In this case it may be possible to argue, as Platt and Platt (1975, p. 35) do, that 'A speech repertoire is the range of linguistic varieties which the speaker has at his disposal and which he may appropriately use as a member of his speech community.'

The concept of 'speech repertoire' may be most useful when applied to individuals rather than to groups. We can use it to describe the communicative competence of individual speakers. Each person will then have a distinctive speech repertoire. Since the Platts find both a community's speech repertoire and an individual's speech repertoire worthy of sociolinguistic consideration, they actually propose the following distinction (p. 36):

> We . . . suggest the term *speech repertoire* for the repertoire of linguistic varieties utilized by a speech community which its speakers, as members of the community, may appropriately use, and the term *verbal repertoire* for the linguistic varieties which are at a particular speaker's disposal.

In this view each individual has his or her own distinctive verbal repertoire and each speech community in which that person participates has its distinctive speech repertoire; in fact, one could argue that this repertoire is its defining feature.

Focusing on the repertoires of individuals and specifically on the precise linguistic choices they make in well-defined circumstances does seem to offer us some hope of explaining how people use linguistic choices to bond themselves to others in very subtle ways. A speaker's choice of a particular sound, word, or expression marks that speaker in some way. It can say 'I am like you' or 'I am not like you.' When the speaker also has some kind of range within which to choose, and that choice itself helps to define the occasion, then many different outcomes are possible. A particular choice may say 'I am an X just like you' or it may say 'I am an X but you are a Y.' It may even be possible that a particular choice may say 'Up till now I have been an X but from now on you must regard me as a Y,' as when, for example, someone pretends to be something he or she is not and then slips up. However, it also seems that it is not merely

Exploration 5.4: Daily Language Use

Keep a log of your language use over a few hours or, if you feel more adventurous, over a full day. Record such factors as the time you spend talking versus listening, reading versus writing, conversing, lecturing, gossiping, asking and answering, complaining, requesting, stating, being silent, humming, being formal and informal, and so on. What are some of the difficulties you encounter in trying to do this kind of thing? (They are legion!) You will need to develop some kind of multi-dimensional framework. The important thing is to discover some of the important issues in doing a task of this kind. Then you should compare your efforts with those of others. (This task should convince you that your everyday language use is extremely complex and that the only way you can hope to make any progress in understanding its full complexity is to focus on a little bit at a time.)

a simple matter of always choosing X rather than Y – for example, of never saying *singin'* but always saying *singing*. Rather, it may be a matter of proportion: you will say *singin'* a certain percent of the time and *singing* the rest of the time. In other words, the social bonding that results from the linguistic choices you make may depend on the quantity of certain linguistic characteristics as well as their quality.

We have seen that 'speech community' may be an impossibly difficult concept to define. However, in attempting to do so, we have also become aware that it may be just as difficult to characterize the speech of a single individual. Perhaps that second failure follows inevitably from the first. We should be very cautious therefore about definitive statements we may be tempted to make about how a particular individual speaks, the classic concept of 'idiolect.' Just what kinds of data should you collect? How much? In what circumstances? And what kind of claims can you make? We will need to find answers to questions such as these before we can proceed very far. Any attempt to study how even a single individual speaks in a rather limited set of circumstances is likely to convince us rather quickly that language is 'messy' stuff. For certain theoretical reasons it might be desirable to ignore a lot of that mess, as Chomsky insists that we do; however, it would be unwise for sociolinguists to do so since that is, in one sense, what sociolinguistics is all about: trying to work out either the social significance of various uses of language or the linguistic significance of various social factors. The following three chapters will address some of these issues.

Further Reading

Two basic sources are Gumperz (1971) and Hymes (1974). For polyglot New York City see Garcia and Fishman (2002). Scherer and Giles (1979) is a useful collection of articles on social markers in speech. See Patrick (2002) for speech communities, Milroy (2002) for social networks, and Meyerhoff (2002) for communities of practice.