8 · GEOGRAPHICAL IDENTITY

The most widely recognized features of linguistic identity are those that point to the geographical origins of the speakers – features of *regional dialect,* which prompt us to ask the question 'Where are they from?' But there are several levels of response to this question. We might have a single person in mind, yet all of the following answers would be correct 'America', 'The United States', 'East Coast', 'New York', 'Brooklyn'. People belong to regional communities of varying extent, and the dialect they speak changes its name as we 'place' them in relation to these communities.

Languages, as well as dialects, can convey geographical information about their speakers, but this information varies greatly, depending on the language of which we are thinking. The variation can be seen if we complete a test sentence using different language names: 'If they speak —, they must be from —.' If the first blank is filled by 'Swedish', the second blank will almost certainly be filled by 'Sweden'. But 'Portuguese' would not inevitably lead to 'Portugal': the second blank could be filled by 'Brazil', 'Angola', 'Mozambique', and several other countries. 'French' would give us the choice of about 40 countries, and 'English' well over 50. 'Dialect', by contrast with 'language', is a much more specific geographical term.

POPULAR NOTIONS OF DIALECT

It is sometimes thought that only a few people speak regional dialects. Many restrict the term to rural forms of speech – as when they say that 'dialects are dying out these days'. They have noticed that country dialects are not as widespread as they once were, but they have failed to notice that urban dialects are now on the increase (p. 32). Another view is to see dialects as substandard varieties of a language, spoken only by low-status groups – implicit in such comments as 'He speaks correct English, without a trace of dialect'. Comments of this kind fail to recognize that standard English is as much a dialect as any other variety – though a dialect of a rather special kind (p. 39). Or again, languages in isolated parts of the world, which may not have been written down, are sometimes referred to pejoratively as dialects, as when someone talks of a tribe speaking 'a primitive kind of dialect'. But this fails to recognize the true complexity and range of all the world's languages (§47).

In this encyclopedia, as is standard practice in linguistics, dialects are seen as applicable to all languages and all speakers. In this view, all languages are analysed into a range of dialects, which reflect the regional and social background of their speakers. The view maintains that everyone speaks a dialect – whether urban or rural, standard or non-standard, upper class or lower class. And no dialect is thought of as 'superior' to any other, in terms of linguistic structure – though several are considered prestigious from a social point of view.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

How easy is it to tell where someone is from? A few years ago, it would have been relatively straightforward for a specialist to work out from a sample of speech the features that identified someone's regional background. Some dialect experts have been known to run radio shows in which they were able to identify the general regional background of members of their audience with considerable success. But it is doubtful whether anyone has ever developed the abilities of Shaw's Henry Higgins: '*I* can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets' (*Pygmalion,* Act 1).

These days, dialect identification has become much more difficult, mainly because of increased social mobility. In many countries, it is becoming less common for people to live their whole lives in one place, and 'mixed' dialects are more the norm. Also, as towns and cities grow, once-distinct communities merge, with a consequent blurring of speech patterns. And nowadays, through radio and television, there is much more exposure to a wide range of dialects, which can influence the speech of listeners or viewers even within their own homes. A radio dialect show would be much less impressive today. On the other hand, meticulous analysis can bring results, and there have been several notable successes in the field of forensic linguistics (p. 69).

DIALECT OR ACCENT?

It is important to keep these terms apart, when discussing someone's linguistic origins. *Accent* refers only to distinctive pronunciation, whereas *dialect* refers to grammar and vocabulary as well. If we heard one person say *He done it* and another say *He did it*, we would refer to them as using different dialects, because a grammatical difference is involved. Similarly, the choice between *wee bairn* and *small child* is dialectal, because this is a contrast in vocabulary. But the difference between *bath* with a 'short *a*' [a] and *bath* with a 'long *a*' [ɑ:] is to do with accent, as this is solely a matter of pronunciation (or phonology, §28).

Usually, speakers of different dialects have different accents; but speakers of the same dialect may have different accents too. The dialect known as 'standard English' is used throughout the world, but it is spoken in a vast range of regional accents.

DIALECT, IDIOLECT, AND LECT

Probably no two people are identical in the way they use language or react to the usage of others. Minor differences in phonology, grammar, and vocabulary are normal, so that everyone has, to a limited extent, a 'personal dialect'. It is often useful to talk about the linguistic system as found in a single speaker, and this is known as an *idiolect.* In fact, when we investigate a language, we have no alternative but to begin with the speech habits of individual speakers: idiolects are the first objects of study. Dialects can thus be seen as an abstraction, deriving from an analysis of a number of idiolects; and languages, in turn, are an abstraction deriving from a number of dialects.

It is also useful to have a term for *any* variety of a language which can be identified in a speech community – whether this be on personal, regional, social, occupational, or other grounds. The term *variety* is itself often used for this purpose; but in recent years, many sociolinguists (p. 418) have begun to use *lect* as a general term in this way.

LANGUAGE VS DIALECT

One of the most difficult theoretical issues in linguistics is how to draw a satisfactory distinction between language and dialect. The importance of this matter will be repeatedly referred to in Part IX, where we have to make judgments about the number of languages in the world and how they are best classified.

At first sight, there may appear to be no problem. If two people speak differently, then, it might be thought, there are really only two possibilities. Either they are not able to understand each other, in which case they can be said to speak different languages; or they do understand each other, in which case they must be speaking different dialects of the same language. This criterion of *mutual intelligibility* works much of the time; but, unfortunately, matters are not always so simple.

MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY

One common problem with this criterion is that dialects belonging to the same language are not always mutually intelligible in their spoken form. It can be very difficult for someone speaking a regional dialect in one part of Britain to understand some of the regional dialects of other areas; and the degree of intelligibility can be even worse when people attempt to communicate with English speakers from other countries. However, at least all of these speakers have one thing in common: they share a common written language. On this count, the varieties they speak could justly be called dialects of the same language.

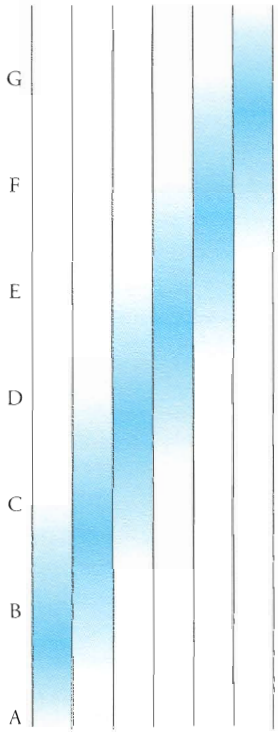
A rather more serious problem arises in cases where there is a geographical *dialect continuum*. There is often a 'chain' of dialects spoken throughout an area. At any point in the chain, speakers of a dialect can understand the speakers of other dialects who live in adjacent areas to them; but they find it difficult to understand people who live further along the chain; and they may find the people who live furthest away completely unintelligible. The speakers of the dialects at the two ends of the chain will not understand each other; but they are nonetheless linked by a chain of mutual intelligibility.

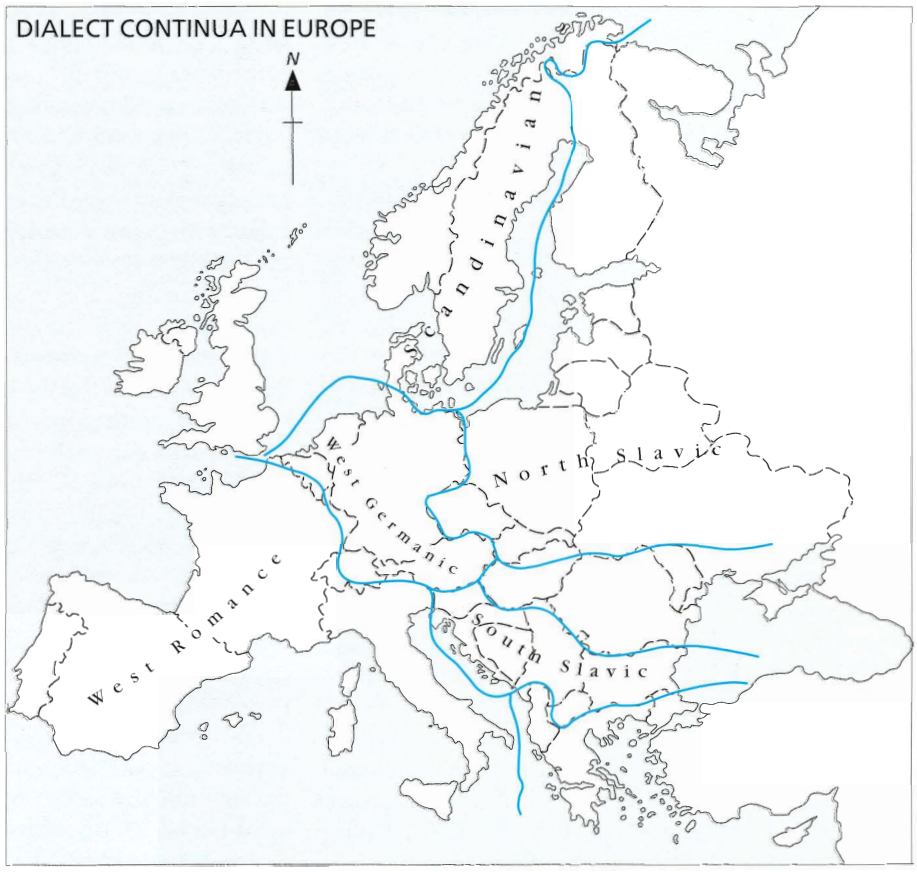
This kind of situation is very common. An extensive continuum links all the dialects of the languages known as German, Dutch, and Flemish. Speakers in eastern Switzerland cannot understand speakers in eastern Belgium; but they are linked by a chain of mutually intelligible dialects throughout the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria. Other chains in Europe include the Scandinavian continuum, which links dialects of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish; the West Romance continuum, which links rural dialects of Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, French, and Italian; and the North Slavic continuum, which links Slovak, Czech, Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian.

The theoretical problem should be clear. At what point in the chain can we say that one language ends and the next begins? On what basis can we draw boundary lines between Portuguese, Spanish, French, and so on? We are used to thinking of these languages as quite different from each other, but this is only because we are usually exposed to their standard varieties, which are not mutually intelligible. At the local level, it is not possible to make a clear decision on linguistic grounds.

But decisions are of course made on other grounds. As one crosses a well-established national boundary, the variety of speech will change its name: 'Dutch' will become 'German', 'Spanish' will become 'Portuguese', 'Swedish' will become 'Norwegian'. It is important to appreciate that the reasons are political and historical, not linguistic (§47). Arguments over language names often reduce to arguments of a political nature, especially when there is a dispute over national boundaries. For example, in the South Slavic continuum, varieties spoken on the western side of the border between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria are called dialects of Macedonian by the former country, but dialects of Bulgarian by the latter – reflecting a claim to the territory. However, because there is a dialect chain in the area, linguistic criteria will never be able to solve conflicts of this kind.

A schematic dialect continuum between dialects A and G. The possible degrees of mutual intelligibility are represented by different shading, from maximum (dark) to zero (light).





DIALECTOLOGY

The systematic study of regional dialects is known variously as *dialectology*, *dialect geography*, or *linguistic geography*; but these terms are not exact equivalents. In particular, the latter terms suggest a much wider regional scope for the subject. Dialect specialists who spend their lives researching the local usage of a single Yorkshire village can hardly be called 'linguistic geographers', though they are certainly 'dialectologists'. By contrast, the 'geographer' designation would be quite appropriate for anyone involved in plotting the distribution of forms over a large area, such as Scotland, or the eastern United States.

There is another difference between these terms. Traditionally, dialectology has been the study of regional dialects, and for many people that is still its main focus. But in recent years, dialectologists have been paying more attention to social as well as geographical space, in order to explain the extent of language variation (§§9–10). Factors such as age, sex, social class, and ethnic group are now seen as critical, alongside factors of a purely regional kind.

But whatever the approach, the contemporary fascination with dialects seems no less than that shown by previous generations. Radio programmes on dialect variations are popular in several countries, and compilations of dialect data continue to be produced in the form of grammars, dictionaries, folk-lore collections, and guides to usage. Local dialect societies thrive in many parts of the world. Dialects continue to be seen as a major source of information about contemporary popular culture and its historical background; and dialect variation forms part of the study of change (§54).

Probably the most important application of dialectology these days is in education, where the development of dialect 'awareness' in children is widely recognized as a way of getting them to see the heterogeneity of contemporary society, and their place within it (§§44, 61). Teachers are often faced with a conflict between the child's spontaneous use of dialect forms and the need to instil a command of the standard language, especially in writing. The conflict can be resolved only by developing in children a sense of the relationships between the two kinds of language, so that the value of both can be better appreciated. There needs to be an awareness of the history, structure, and function of present-day dialects – and this is what dialectology can provide.

THE HISTORY OF REGIONAL DIALECTOLOGY

While there has been sporadic interest in regional dialects for centuries, the first large-scale systematic studies, in Germany and France, did not take place until the end of the 19th century. In 1876, Georg Wenker (1852–1911) began sending out questionnaires to all the school districts in the German Empire. It took him ten years to contact nearly 50,000 local teachers, who were asked to provide equivalents for 40 sentences in the local dialect. An enormous amount of data was received, and this led to the publication in 1881 of the first linguistic atlas, *Sprachatlas des Deutschen Reichs*. A larger series of works, based on Wenker's files, appeared between 1926 and 1956; but even today, much of the original material has not been published.

The postal questionnaire method enables a large amount of data to be accumulated in a relatively short time, but it has several limitations – chiefly that dialect pronunciations cannot be accurately recorded. The alternative, to send out trained field workers to observe and record the dialect forms, was first used in the linguistic survey of France, which began in 1896. The director, Jules Gilliéron (1854–1926), appointed Edmond Edmont (1849–1926) – a grocer with a very sharp ear for phonetic differences – to do the field work. For four years, Edmont went around France on a bicycle, conducting interviews with 700 informants using a specially devised questionnaire of nearly 2,000 items. The *Atlas linguistique de la France* was subsequently published in 13 volumes between 1902 and 1910. It stands as the most influential work in the history of dialectology.

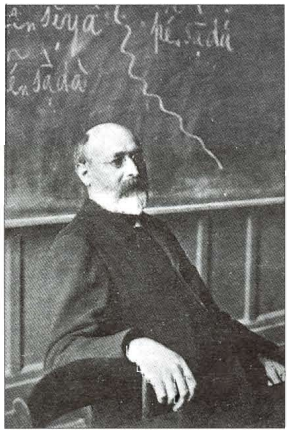
In the first half of this century, major projects were initiated in many parts of Europe, such as Romania, Italy, Holland, Spain, and Denmark, and there have been several impressive publications. In due course the large-scale dialect surveys of the United States and England began (p. 30). A great deal of dialect work has also been undertaken in Japan and China, as well as in parts of Africa, Australia, Canada, and South America. In some countries, even, surveys leading to a 'second generation' of linguistic atlases have begun. Direct interviewing and postal questionnaires continue to be used today, as does the tradition of presenting the linguistic material in the form of maps; and in recent years, dialectology has benefited enormously from the development of techniques using tape recorders. The field is also now being influenced by the electronic revolution, with computers helping to 'crunch' the data provided by questionnaires, and making large databases of regional variants more available, accessible, and analysable – and even more visible, using computer graphic techniques.

However, nowadays there are fewer big regional dialect projects, and some of those that have begun may never be completed. This is mainly because of the large costs involved in collecting, analysing, and publishing dialect data; but it is also partly because of the new direction dialect studies have taken. Younger scholars are these days more likely to be attracted by the sociolinguistically inspired approaches that developed in the 1970s. with their focus on social factors, and on urban rather than on rural dialects (p. 32).

THE EARLIEST USE OF DIALECTOLOGY?

Then Gilead cut Ephraim off from the fords of the Jordan, and whenever an Ephraimite fugitive said 'Let me cross', the men of Gilead asked him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?'. If he answered 'No', they said, 'Then say "Shibboleth".' He would say 'Sibboleth', since he could not pronounce the word correctly. Thereupon they seized and slaughtered him by the fords of the Jordan.
(Judges XII, 4–6)

The Ephraimites were betrayed by their regional pronunciation. As a result of this story, *shibboleth*, which then meant 'ear of corn' or 'flowing stream', has in modern use come to mean 'distinguishing mark' or 'criterion'.



Jules Gillieron (1854–1926)