Chapter Four The mismatch between theory and practice

Because linguists do not just describe language but also deal with social problems, a theory that does not build in an understanding of how language and social values are interconnected is of little practical help. Taking up a strong anti-prescriptive position and claiming that all varieties of language are equally good is intended to help the disadvantaged, but is more likely to force the linguist to take up an indefensible position (4.1), to miss the interpersonal dimension of meaning (4.2), and to develop a split personality (4.3). To explain how this happens, I have referred in particular to Labov (1969),[1] and also to Milroy and Milroy (1991; 1999), Pinker (1994), and Aitchison (1997), texts which are well-known in (socio)linguistics and also have some audience beyond the discipline.

4.1 Taking up an indefensible position

As observed in 3.1 above, there is no field of linguistics in which a linguist can completely avoid engaging in activities that require him or her to make evaluative decisions about language. Even if not involved in teaching, he or she is bound to become involved in decisions about correct English. The language of research written up for publication must be edited to conform to the standards of the academic community, from achieving the right level of formality in the lexicogrammar down to the most arbitrary prescriptive details of the publisher's preferences. This necessitates 'prescribing to oneself': accepting that some forms of language are better for the purpose than others. Anti-prescriptivism taken to its logical conclusion would mean opting out of this activity, which is not a option for any linguist who wants a hearing. Those who claim to abjure prescriptivism are therefore vulnerable to accusations that they do not practise what they preach; clearly they *do* profit from prescriptive attitudes to language. Love, for one, referring to Aitchison's 1996 BBC Reith lectures, observes that 'on this point many will suspect bad faith on the linguist's part: Aitchison's own prose shows no sign of the carefree attitude to artificially imposed rules that she exhorts others to adopt' (1998:208). This is not an easy charge to answer,

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In my discussion of Labov (1969), lack of space has obliged me to omit reference to Labov's attack on Bernstein's theory of the elaborated and restricted codes, relevant though it is to my argument. Christie notes that Labov has been 'often credited with mounting a major critique of Bernstein', although 'The evidence of this is actually very hard to find' (Christie 1999b:7-8n.1). Much of Hasan's work has been aimed at vindicating Bernstein (1989;1992;1999a).

but one that needs to be faced by any linguist who makes a strong statement of the anti-prescriptive 'all language varieties are equal' position.

One of the most well-known of such statements is Labov's landmark article *The logic of nonstandard English* (1969), which I discuss here as an example of the difficulties the linguist faces when taking up this position. (Page numbers in sections 4.1 and 4.2 refer to this article unless otherwise stated.) The contradictions in this thirty-year-old example would not matter if things had changed in linguistics, but there is no reason to believe that they have, given the continuing failure of mainstream linguistics to include value in its theory in a coherent and socially responsible fashion and its willingness to keep teaching the anti-prescriptive, all-languages-are-equal position to beginners in the discipline as though it were an unproblematic principle, as evidenced by this statement from a recent introductory text:

> All languages and varieties of a particular language have grammars that enable their speakers to express any proposition that the human mind can produce. In terms of this all-important criterion, then, all varieties of language are absolutely equal as instruments of communication and thought. The goal of contemporary linguistic analysis is not to rank languages on some imaginary scale of superiority. (O'Grady et al.1997:6)

In this article, Labov argues that a socially disfavoured form of language, 'nonstandard Negro English' (NNE) is as logical as standard English (SE). The article's immediate aim is to refute claims by some educational psychologists of the day that black children in the ghettos perform badly in school owing to 'verbal deprivation', which purportedly makes them incapable of thinking logically. Its broader aim is to demonstrate that linguists can counter society's prejudices by teaching people 'the facts of language' (34), because this would show them that there is no essential difference between the standard and non-standard varieties of English; it is only historical accident that has given the former its privileged status. In fact, Labov goes beyond this agenda and suggests that NNE is *more* apt for logical argument than middle-class standard English. To make this point, he takes as examples the contrasted discourse styles of 15-year-old Larry H., 'a paradigmatic speaker of NNE' (13),'one of the loudest and roughest members' of a street gang, who 'causes trouble in and out of school' (12), and Charles M., 'an upper-middle-class, college educated Negro man' (16). He shows that Larry's response to the interviewer's questions is 'quick, ingenious and decisive' (14), while Charles's is verbose, hesitant and vague (16-19), and uses this evidence to claim that the differences in 'surface' features between NNE

and SE make no difference to the meanings that can be expressed by either: they are equally capable of being used to make logical statements. In fact, he sets everything up to favour the NNE speaker's way of making them.

He is therefore brought to the point where he feels obliged to acknowledge what he refers to as 'the inevitable challenge':

> The reader will have noticed that this analysis is being carried out in standard English, and the inevitable challenge is: why not write in NNE, then, or in your own nonstandard dialect? The fundamental reason is, of course, one of fixed social conventions. All communities agree that SE is the 'proper' medium for formal writing and public communication. Furthermore, it seems likely that SE has an advantage over NNE in explicit analysis of surface forms, which is what we are doing here. We will return to this opposition between explicitness and logical statement in sections 3 and 4. (15)

This is an answer that stems from two fundamental flaws in the theory underlying Labov's article: (i) the view that meaning exists independently of language (this was 1969, and the analysis is heavily influenced by Chomsky's Deep Structure), and (ii) the failure to take into consideration the interpersonal meaning of language. His admission that 'it seems likely that SE has an advantage over NNE in explicit analysis of surface forms' (15) suggests he is aware that attributing the privileged status of standard English to 'social convention' is not really a satisfactory answer. However, he does not give a better one in this article. If he did, it would undermine his argument that Larry's logic is better than Charles's, an argument which depends on seeing meaning/logic as pre-existing and independent of the 'surface' form of language. He makes this argument very strongly, as is evidenced by such remarks as: 'To say that this dialect lacks the means for logical expression is to confuse logic with surface detail. ... Careful attention to surface features is a temporary skill needed for language learning – and neglected thereafter by competent speakers' (25). The admission does, however, seem to be a nod in the direction of acknowledging a difference in functionality between the two forms of English, but phrased so vaguely as to make it hard to tell exactly what he means.

The nominal group *an advantage over NNE in explicit analysis of surface forms* warrants serious consideration, as it reveals the stratagems a linguist is led into to cover up the incoherence of the 'equality of varieties' claim. The obscurity of a nominalized form may result from the difficulty

of recovering the agent – we wonder who is doing the 'explicit analysis of surface forms'– but that does not seem to be the immediate problem here, as the additional qualifier 'which is what we are doing here' suggests the agent is Labov, or 'linguists in general', as being the only people likely to be interested in 'explicitly analysing the surface forms' of language. (However, further into the article we discover that this reading is not what is intended.) The immediate problem is that the nominalization *analysis* produces an ambiguous reading because it is not clear whether Labov means SE is 'the thing being analysed' or 'the thing being used to analyse', and the prepositions *in* and *of* do not provide any clues for disambiguating it. Two possible interpretations are:

(i) Linguists find SE is better than NNE as a tool for analysing the surface forms of language.

(ii) When linguists analyse the surface forms of SE and NNE they find that SE has an [unspecified] advantage [for persons unspecified].

If (i) is the intended meaning, then this is a claim that should be followed up: it would be interesting to know what features of SE make it more useful to linguists than NNE. But it would be a rather weak statement of the advantage of SE, because it would not explain why people other than linguists – scientists, technologists, literary critics, or anyone wanting to impart serious information to a serious-minded audience – choose to use SE. Labov could hardly be claiming that linguists alone recognize the advantage of SE. So the intended agent may be 'anyone who describes explicitly the appearance – i.e. surface features – of any entity', which would include scientists in general. But this does not in fact seem to be the interpretation Labov intends, and anyway he says nothing more in this paper about this possible advantage; i.e. he does not address the question of how his own SE has helped him make explicit analyses of surface forms, nor why NNE might not have served the purpose.

Interpretation (ii) therefore seems to be the intended one. Perhaps this remark was intended to suggest that his analyses of SE and NNE forms in sections 3 and 4 of his article (which he says will deal with the 'opposition between explicitness and logical statement') will show that SE possesses more resources for being explicit and therefore has an advantage. However, as it happens, section 3 and 4 do not enlighten us. In section 3 he argues that what the teacher imagines to be a lesson in logic is nothing more than getting the child to make explicit some

'internalized rules' (for example, answering a question with a full sentence rather than with a phrase), but he does not describe this as an advantage: it is only 'produc[ing] slightly different forms of the language he already has' (22). In section 4 he sets out some specific differences in the forms of NNE and SE, but again does not suggest that there is any *advantage* in the latter. He is at pains in both of these sections to demonstrate just the opposite: that 'the only difference between the two dialects is in superficial form' (23). Interpretation (ii) therefore does not seem to be quite right either, but it is more likely than (i). Whichever is the case, this tantalizing nod in the direction of linguistic relativity is not followed up, for the obvious reason that to do so would destroy the case he is making for varieties being equal.[2]

If by 'explicit analysis of surface forms' Labov means that SE makes the logical structure of a proposition more explicit, then his failure to consider why this might be an advantage is unfortunate, because it could lead to valuable insight into the functionality of standard languages. (But again one which, if pursued, would not support the 'equality of varieties' argument.) Halliday observes that a standard language is 'a form of discourse in which the flow of information will typically be rendered explicit rather than being taken for granted' (2000:229). In other words, he is saying it is the textual metafunction (Halliday 1994a:37ff) that is foregrounded in this form of discourse. The failure to realise this means that Labov misses an opportunity to affirm the practice of good language teachers, who have no difficulty understanding the advantages that mastery of a standard language can confer. Instead, he dismisses as foolish their attempts to make children answer with a 'full sentence', for example, requiring that they answer the question *Where is the squirrel?* with *The squirrel is in the tree* and not *In the tree* (19). However, I would argue that the resources that enable standard English to make explicit its own structure as a message are not trivial, as Labov seems to believe, but essential if a reader of formal written English is to be able to follow the line of argument easily. Instead of attacking the teacher's intuitive grasp of this fact, the linguist could be building on it to produce further pedagogically applicable descriptions. It would also vindicate the teacher, who is on the right track in making this rudimentary attempt to teach explicit structure *(The squirrel* – Theme, *is in the tree* – Rheme), provided of course that he or she also makes it clear that such structuring is a feature typical of written (and formal spoken) English rather than casual spoken English.

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2 (But with some varieties more equal than others.)

On reading further we discover a third possible interpretation of Labov's admission:

(iii) SE is a better tool than NNE for *schoolchildren* to use in order to analyse the surface forms of language.[3]

This would not seem a likely interpretation were it not for his remark, ten pages further into the article, that 'We have already conceded that NNE children need help in analyzing language into its surface components, and in being more explicit' (26). This sounds like a comment on the value of teaching grammar formally in the classroom, but nowhere in the article does he discuss this issue. What he seems to mean by 'analyzing language into its surface components' is the drilling method in which children are made to learn language by 'repeat[ing] *This is not a box* for twenty minutes a day' (26). However, repeating sentences in SE is not 'analyzing language into surface components', though the teacher who prepares the drills could perhaps be said to have done this; and Labov does not make it clear how this counts as 'analyzing' language or why it should be thought that SE 'has an advantage' for doing it. It would surely also be possible to drill NNE sentences. He cannot be arguing that this 'advantage' he is referring to is mere social convention, because after attributing his own choice of SE to 'social conventions' he then says that *'Furthermore*, it seems likely that SE has an advantage ... etc.' The reader cannot discover from Labov's article what this mysterious advantage is, probably because his theoretical affiliation does not permit him to admit there *are* functional advantages in any variety of language.

As none of the above three interpretations seems entirely plausible, the remark can perhaps be read as meaning only 'we can explain things more explicitly in SE': a nod in the direction of an inconvenient counter-argument. In other words, the vagueness and ambiguity of its phrasing is not an accident but part of its meaning. One of the advantages of standard (academic, typically written) English is the many resources it offers for backgrounding, downplaying and obscuring

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3 Edwards is one who has read this interpretation into the remark. He says 'Labov acknowledges that it may prove useful to the child (especially at school) to consider more carefully the explicit structure of SE and, in short, to better recognize the value, in some contexts, of paying closer attention to surface details' (1979:54). This is an example of a phenomenon known to rhetoricians (the principle of the *enthymeme*): that the well-disposed listener will fill in the missing stage of the argument, absolving the speaker from responsibility for it and giving the listener a sense of ownership of the argument and thus a stake in it.

propositions we do not want the reader to challenge. This facility is valuable for the case Labov is making, because if he made the remark challengeable (as I have done in versions (i), (ii) and (iii) above, by making its proposition overt), it might prompt awkward questions about why language should develop features for being more explicit if these features make no difference to the underlying meaning, as he has been at pains to prove; or why, having grudgingly[4] claimed explicitness as an advantage of standard English, he should then spend the next four pages decrying Charles's vagueness in order to demonstrate that standard English is notable for its *in*explicitness.

Towards the end of section 4 he makes a second remark on the subject of the advantage of SE: 'there is of course nothing wrong with learning to be explicit – as we have seen, that is one of the main advantages of standard English at its best – but it is important that we recognize what is actually taking place, and what teachers are in fact trying to do' (25). Despite the phrase 'as we have seen', the connection with the earlier remark is not at all obvious, because the intervening argument has all been geared to proving that there is *no* advantage in standard English. Teaching explicitness is presented as, at best, harmless. ('There is nothing wrong with learning to be explicit', 25; 'there does not seem to be any great harm in having children repeat *This is not a box* for twenty minutes a day', 26.) The examples are all geared to proving that there is no real advantage in the SE forms. For example, the results of repetition tests, which show that the NNE speakers 'translate' into NNE forms the SE sentences they are asked to repeat, are used to demonstrate that the tests are pointless because the speakers have grasped the *meanings* of these sentences. Yet is it clear in some cases that inattention to the 'superficial form' (24) *does* change the meaning; for example, when the sentence *Nobody ever sat at those desks, anyhow* comes back as *Nobody [es'] ever sat at no desses, anyhow* (24). Here the speaker seems to have interpreted the sentence as meaning 'Nobody else ever sat at any desks, anyhow'.

This second remark is the only suggestion in this paper, other than the one about 'explicit analysis', that there might be an advantage to SE. Elsewhere, Labov suggests only equality or disadvantage; for example: 'When we have discovered how much middle-class style is a matter of fashion and how much actually helps us express our ideas clearly, we will have done ourselves

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4 The grudgingness is apparent from the modal clause 'It seems likely' and the fact that he does not pursue the matter.

a great service' (19). As this comes at the end of his long analysis of Charles's verbose style, it suggests he does not think very much advantage *will* be found; rather the opposite. Indeed, it is hard not to believe that the example of Charles's discourse was chosen to display SE at its least advantageous, while Larry's street talk displays NNE at its wittiest, and is analysed in such a way as to demonstrate its advantages.

One advantage claimed for Larry's NNE is that 'the full force of his opinions comes through without qualification or reservation' (13). Labov treats this as a virtue, and Charles's vagueness and circumlocution as a vice. Certainly there is value in directness, but it would be naive to think there is no value in *in*directness. Halliday suggests it is characteristic of modern standard English that as a result of the tendency 'towards giving greater prominence to the organization of the discourse as a flow of information, making more explicit how each element is to be construed as part of a message ... much less prominence is given to the experiential patterning, much of which is left implicit once the concern with the message begins to take over' (2000:229). This is surely what has happened in Labov's hard-to-interpret remark about 'explicit analysis of surface forms'. Standard written English has developed resources for *avoiding* the experiential directness that he praises in Larry's speech. Labov apparently shares with prescriptive traditional grammarians the belief that the purpose of language is to make your meaning clear, yet one of the functions that SE, particularly the academic variety, carries out with great success is that of obfuscation, as has been mentioned above. This is of course often criticised, but the fact remains that much academic writing depends for its success on *not* being too obvious in its meaning.[5] In a perfect world, direct language would be the ideal but, given the necessity in an imperfect one to negotiate our meanings with others who may not be kindly disposed, mastery of a form of language with resources for subterfuge is an undeniable advantage.

Ironically, it is Labov's command of these resources (and others, such as modality, discussed further below), that makes it possible for him to disguise the fact that he has not answered the

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5 For example, Hoey discusses embedding as one of the grammatical resources academic English uses to achieve this end. He notes, for example, that 'the embedding of the evaluation protects Chomsky from having to provide a basis for a contentious viewpoint' (1983:34). Hodge and Kress also examine the way Chomsky, in *Syntactic Structures*, 'exploit[s] the mystification his community is habituated to for his own purposes' (1993:33).

'challenge' about why he chooses to use SE (or alternately why it would not suit his purpose to use NNE). The power of SE is attested to by the fact that an *un*kindly disposed person, (a person taking the position I have), is put to considerable trouble to find the contestable points in his argument. In an endnote, Labov mentions that some readers of his paper did in fact offer some resistance, objecting that they found it possible to read better sense into Charles's remarks than Labov has done, and he concedes this possibility, but his point is that 'no such subtleties of interpretation are needed to understand Larry's remarks' (36, n.14). On the other hand, it requires considerable 'subtlety of interpretation' to challenge Labov.

Another well-recognized resource which the academic variety of SE provides for reducing the salience of potentially contentious points is interpersonal metaphor (Halliday1994a:354-367). Instead of the congruent *In certain cultures there is probably such a thing as witchcraft*, Charles says *I do feel that in certain cultures there is such a thing as witchcraft* (16). The metaphorical form of modality allows the speaker to dress the modality up as the proposition, but the tag test reveals which part of the remark actually is the proposition: *I do feel that in certain cultures there is such a thing as witchcraft isn't there? *don't I?* Halliday observes that 'Speakers being what we are, however, we like to give prominence to our own point of view; and the most effective way of doing that is to dress it up as if it was this that constituted the assertion ('explicit [subjective]' *I think* ...) with the further possibility of making it appear as if it was not our point of view at all ('explicit objective' *it's likely that* ...)' (1994a:362). It is this second possibility that allows Labov to dodge responsibility for his proposition: prefacing the remark about *explicit analysis of surface forms* with *It seems likely that*. Charles uses the subjective variety only : *I don't particularly believe*; *I don't think* (twice); I *do feel* (twice); *I do believe* (16); which suggests he is not the best example Labov might have chosen of a standard English speaker, who might be expected to have command of a wider range of modal resources. (The topic of modality is discussed further in 4.2, below.)

This suggests another advantage of SE that Labov does not mention: the *variety* of resources it commands. Hasan observes that

> It is not the racism of social class which prompts the observation, *objectively real*, that the register repertoire of dominated varieties is always narrower than that of the dominating one(s); rather, the observation is based on the principle that the wider the range of social processes one engages in the greater one's social power.

> ... There is a spiralling effect in the mutually supportive relation of the elements of this trajectory, where the holding of a social position is tantamount to engagement in a larger range of social processes, which is tantamount to holding a wider register repertoire, which is tantamount to the capacity to recognize the opportunities that call for new social processes, which in turn underlies the users' struggle to use their existing resources to stretch out to meet these needs, which further enhances their power to hold on to their social position. (1999:56, emphasis in original.)

The involvement of language in the social and the social in language is complex. If the strength of a standard language (a dominant variety) lies in its having a 'wider register repertoire', then when discussing SE we need to specify *which kind* of SE we have in mind, rather than referring to it as if it were a monolithic entity. It is hard to tell what exactly Labov means by the term SE, but the following passage gives some hints, mostly in the form of what it is *not*:

> It is true that technical and scientific books are written in a style which is markedly 'middle-class'. But unfortunately, we often fail to achieve the explicitness and precision which we look for in such writing; and the speech of many middle-class people departs maximally from this target. All too often, 'standard English' is represented by a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague. The accumulating flow of words buries rather than strikes the target. It is this verbosity which is most easily taught and most easily learned, so that words take the place of thought, and nothing can be found behind them. (19)

He seems to be suggesting that the desirable variety of SE is the written technical and scientific kind; but the phrase *which we look for* makes it unclear whether he is saying that we attempt to imitate the explicitness and precision of technical and scientific writing but often fail, or that technical and scientific writing often fails to be as explicit or precise as it should be. What is not in doubt is that he is implying there is an ideal form of SE, and there are others that do not measure up. This ideal form is the 'target', and the speech of middle-class speakers like Charles 'departs maximally from this target' (19).

This would be clear enough were it not that NNE is not pictured thus in Labov's paper. We are given the impression that there is one uniform variety, although the data is in fact a variety that is spoken by Larry, and other street gang members and younger hangers-on: 'the population we are concerned with are those who participate fully in the vernacular culture of the street and who have been alienated from the school system' (3). (There is one reference to a small difference, which is that four- to seven-year-old NNE speakers use the full form of the copula *is* more often

than the older groups that were studied, 20.). Spears quotes a study based on evidence from 'hundreds of black educators from more than sixty traditionally black colleges' which found that 'they refuse to accept Black English as a separate dialect independent of American White English' and that 'what bothers them most is "that people in the Black English business give the impression that these features are in the speech of all Blacks and that all Blacks, regardless of age, region and social class, speak alike"' (1980:176).

Labov does not differentiate in this article between registers of SE, although he *mentions* some: technical, and scientific, and (in discussion after his paper) 'the convoluted syntax of literary language' (42). His article implicitly subsumes all of these under the general heading of 'middle-class style', which is represented by Charles's 180 words of vague chat about witchcraft. He apparently considers edited written academic English (such as his own) and Charles's unrehearsed spoken English both to be manifestations of SE. When he turns to examining Charles's language he says 'it will be helpful to examine SE in its primary natural setting, as the medium for the informal spoken communication of middle-class speakers' (16). This suggests that SE is, as it were, the same thing wherever you find it, as if the context had no effect on the register, a notion which renders incoherent his complaints about the poor quality of Charles's SE. If SE is 'one thing', how are we to understand the idea that there may be varieties of it, particularly deficient ones? If his remark about the 'primary natural setting' is merely a way of saying that Charles's 'standard' English is the prototypical example, and presumably not the kind teachers want to teach their pupils, then in what sense is the language of science or technology, which Labov sets up as an ideal, to be considered 'standard' too?

The remark quoted above is evidence that Labov does have in mind some ideal form of SE: 'All too often, "standard English" is represented by a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague' (19). Does 'represented' mean that Charles's SE is a mass of 'performance' errors, and that the ideal SE is the 'competence' of scientists and technologists? If this is the case, then we need a description of the features of this ideal in order to know what is being 'represented'. This Labov cannot give, because it would lead him into the prescriptive position the linguist has abjured: he would find himself explaining the functional advantages of a variety that is used by an elite. It is the idea that we 'find SE in various settings' that is misleading. Roy Harris makes a similar observation about Honey's (1997) treatment of SE as 'one and the same language, even when its usage is manifestly diverse' and states that 'Honey's linguistics has no semblance of

theoretical coherence'.[6] But although this commonsense way of talking about a variety of styles as all being kinds of SE is not theoretically coherent, it makes even less sense to criticise Charles's rambling speech as a poor specimen of SE, while at the same time saying that this is SE in its 'primary natural setting'. The incoherence lies not only in the idea of SE as somehow simultaneously homogeneous and diverse, but also in the undefined term 'setting'. If we take for example 'storytelling for children' as a 'natural setting' for SE, what then would it mean to say that 'Once upon a time' is SE, when this particular phrase is found in no other 'setting' (excluding parody)? (The problem is one of thinking language is detachable from its context. Halliday's notion of 'context of situation', a corrective to this fallacy, is discussed in 5.3.6, below.)

Labov is working on the assumption that variation is arbitrary and that all varieties are essentially the same thing 'under the skin': the 'kind of variation which Labov (1972) has described as different ways of saying the same thing' (Hasan 1999:63). This theoretical stance affects his own use of language: if variation is only skin-deep, then terminology does not need to be handled with care; if wording is only surface forms, all that matters is that we should grasp the meaning. Others may not, however, be so ready to overlook the connotations of the terms *standard* and *nonstandard*. The potential for offence is not defused by Labov's brief reference to *nonstandard white dialects* and *the white nonstandard speaker* (23): it just adds another group of potential offendees. Apparently oblivious to the objections black educators might have to the lumping together of blacks as NNE speakers, Labov says that 'All linguists who work with nonstandard Negro English recognise that it is a separate system, closely related to standard English, but set apart from the surrounding white dialects by a number of persistent and systematic differences' (32), thus suggesting that whites have many dialects, whereas blacks have only one, as a more cautious delegate (Sister Dolores Burton) at the Georgetown meeting observes:

> This is just a terminological point, but I have been rather disturbed since the conference began last night by dichotomies like 'Appalachian white' and 'Negro speech', implying in one case that there is a social class distinction for the whites, but that the other label belongs to all blacks. And also the distinction just made between Black or nonstandard English and white speech, which seems sort of subtly racist to the effect that all blacks or all Negroes speak a nonstandard

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6 'Fighting the many enemies', review of Honey (1997), *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 5 September, 1997:19.

> dialect, and I just think that we could be a little more sensitive to the terminology here. (Alatis 1969:88-9)

Labov responds to this comment by saying that 'the literature' does differentiate between a variety of Negro dialects.[7] He says that 'If every discussion of the dialect is to be prefixed by the seven or eight paragraphs that are necessary to deal with this topic adequately, we won't get very far' (Alatis 1969:89). The problem is that interested outsiders, or beginners in linguistics, are likely to read not 'the literature' but a paper such as Labov (1969), which is plainly designed not as an 'insider' document but to have an impact on educators. His claim about the necessity to simplify is not an adequate excuse: his paper fails to suggest there might be a standard Negro English. Charles's education has made him a standard English speaker: his variety is no longer racially classified. More recent sociolinguistic terminology – 'Black English Vernacular' or 'African-American Vernacular English' – has the merit of getting away from the invidious word *nonstandard*, although the racial classification persists. The word *standard*, however, has not gone away, despite its unsuitability as a technical term, suggesting as it inevitably does that other varieties must be *sub*standard. This is more than 'just a terminological point'. McArthur quotes a suggestion for a substitute made by an 'African-American Educator', Lisa Delpit:

> I don't use the term standard English. What I talk about is edited English, which essentially is the English you see in books – English that has been taken through an editing process. Some people's home language is more closely related to edited English than other people's, but nobody exactly speaks edited English. It's important to make the distinction because edited English is the language of power. If you don't have access to edited English, you don't have access to the power institutions in this country. If I didn't have access to edited English, I wouldn't be asked to do an interview, I wouldn't be successful in graduate school, I wouldn't be able to work at creating change in the way that I am hoping to do. (McArthur 2001:8)

Besides the label problem, Labov's ways of referring to SE and NNE are uneven. Whereas the term *NNE* is used without variation throughout, the term *SE* is used interchangeably with such expressions as *middle-class language* (4), *middle-class verbal behavior* (11), *middle-class verbal style* (12) *middle-class verbosity* (18), *middle-class forms* (18), and *middle-class style* (19). On page 18, NNE is compared with *middle-class forms*, not with *SE forms*, but on page19 Labov

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7 An example in the same volume is Shuy (1969), which describes 'a search for a terminology by which language judgements can be made meaningfully by laymen' (1969:183).

again refers to *standard English*, this time to say it is often 'represented by a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague', after which he returns to the term *middle-class style*. The problem with using 'middle-class style' as a synonym for SE is that whereas 'SE' and 'NNE' are technical terms, 'middle-class style' clearly has attitudinal overtones.[8] (In the discussion that follows this article, a participant raises the point that he is 'a little bit worried about the way people toss the term *middle class* around', 39). Terms referring to the speakers of NNE and SE are also inconsistent, as TABLE 4.1 shows (giving page numbers of instances).

TABLE 4.1 References to NNE and SE speakers in Labov (1969)

NNE	SE
ghetto children (2) *the Negro speech community* (11) *working-class speakers* (12, 19) *a paradigmatic speaker of NNE* (13) *speakers from the NNE community* (15) *working-class children* (19) *nonstandard speaker(s)* (19, 22) *Negro speakers* (23) *NNE children* (26) *the Negro child* (29) *the Negro people* (29) *Negro children* (passim)	*middle-class speakers* (12,16,17,19) *educated people* (18) *standard English speakers* (22) *middle-class children* (12, 18, 19, 25, 26, 30)

The following features are noticeable. NNE is seen as the property of a particular race group. There is much emphasis on the Negro speech community, but insufficient indication that Labov is in fact describing the speech of one section of this community: the inhabitants of a ghetto. It is a telling slip that he at one point refers to *Negro speakers*, when he plainly means *nonstandard Negro English speakers*. Charles is a 'Negro speaker', but he speaks SE. Standard English seems to be what everyone other than NNE speakers speaks, apart from some briefly mentioned white nonstandard speakers (23).

[8] The example from the BNC quoted in 3.3.1, above, about 'imposing middle-class values', is typical of the attitudinal usage of the term, as revealed by a search of this corpus which I do not have space to detail here.

Apart from the one reference to *SE speakers*, on the whole the impression given is that SE is not really what anyone speaks; what people speak is *middle-class style*: a defective version of SE. The other kinds of SE Labov refers to are prototypically written ones: scientific, technical, literary. The undereducated Negro youth speak NNE and it does not come in different – or defective – varieties. (There is no discussion in his paper of the problems that might be experienced by someone trying to *write* in the NNE style and be taken seriously). SE, on the other hand, comes in many varieties, and this prompts questions about what sort of comparison Labov can be making and how useful it can be. To take a biological analogy, it is as though instead of comparing, say, mice with rats, we were to compare mice with mammals. Such a comparison might conceivably yield useful insights, so long as we did not also claim that mammals are all the same thing, and so long as we did not now and then switch from discussing mammals to discussing rats and claim that they are the same thing as mammals: a prototypical kind, but also a defective kind. It is tempting to speculate about the difference it would make to Labov's argument if the terminology were more precise; if he had, for example, differentiated clearly between typically *spoken* and typically *written* varieties, or if he had referred to the two speech styles as *the English of children and adolescents of a South Central Harlem ghetto* and *the English of a Central Harlem adult college graduate*.

The terminology compromises its own validity by veering from the technical to the commonsensical; which would not be a fault were it not that the technicality is mostly on one side. NNE is discussed in both kinds of language: technical – *optional copula deletion*, etc., (13) and attitudinal (positive) – *Negro children receive a great deal of verbal stimulation, hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children, and participate fully in a highly verbal culture* (2); *we see many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills* (11); whereas SE is discussed almost exclusively in attitudinal terms (negative) – *turgid, redundant, and empty*, 12; *verbosity... padding... vacuity* (16-17); *over-particular and vague ... the accumulating flow of words buries rather than strikes the target* (19). Where Labov does refer to SE using the linguist's technical terms it is to observe that NNE has the same underlying rules – *the deletion of the <u>is</u> or <u>are</u> in nonstandard Negro English is not the result of erratic or illogical behavior: it follows the same regular rules as standard English contraction* (20).[9]

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9 This claim is contested by Stewart (1969), who argues that NNE has its own rules which are not like SE. This is discussed in section 4.3, below.

Adding to this lopsidedness is the incommensurability of the data. It is arguable whether valid comparison can be made between, on the one hand, turns in a dialogue by an adolescent acknowledged to be a particularly accomplished speaker of his variety – 'One can almost say that Larry speaks the NNE culture', he is 'a paradigmatic speaker of NNE' (13) – and, on the other hand, a monologue by an adult who, it is suggested, is a rather poor speaker of his – 'Charles M. succeeds in letting us know he is educated, but in the end we do not know what he is trying to say, and neither does he' (18). It is ironic that Labov later criticises 'generative grammarians' who make assumptions and generalisations based on examples cited from 'one person's idiolect' (Alatis 1969:89). The novelist Amy Tan makes just this criticism of linguists who generalise on the basis of observation of individuals. She says 'I worry about the effect of one-dimensional statements on the unwary and guileless' (1990:26). Sampson also makes this point: 'it is dangerous to rest conclusions about language in general on the linguistic behaviour of one individual, perhaps idiosyncratic, writer' (2001:15). However, given that one individual *is* being taken as exemplifying a discourse style, we might consider the difference it would have made to Labov's claims had he taken as his example of a standard English speaker one really proficient in an interview situation, for example this one, who is as anti-establishment as Larry, but who can make his point without being obviously belligerent:

> He embarks on one of those elaborate sentences he excels in: "So if you find people in a partitioned Ireland – who are not treated as badly as people in South Africa, not as badly as the Jewish people were, not as badly as the Palestinian people – resort to armed action, whether that is right or wrong is something else, then you find the establishment which has built itself out of violence, depicts these people as terrorists." (Simon Hattenstone, 'The man with no past', *Mail and Guardian*, May 4 to10, 2001:27. An article based on an interview with Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein. Also at archives http://www.mg.co.za)

What is interesting here is the interviewer's comment on this clause complex: 'He embarks on one of those elaborate sentences he excels in'.[10] Labov says that in Larry's community verbal skills are much admired: 'We see many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills: sounding, singing, toasts, rifting, louding – a whole range of activities

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10 In SFG the clause is taken as the basic unit of language, rather than the sentence, which is a constituent of *writing*: 'the orthographic unit that is contained between full stops' (Halliday 1994a:23;216). This categorization allows for more meaningful comparison between spoken and written language.

in which the individual gains status through his use of language' (11), and Larry is one of the stars. Gerry Adams is a speaker whose verbal skills have gained him status in *his* community, so we have the potential for a fair comparison: Larry versus Gerry, rather than Larry versus mild, unassuming Charles.[11]

An obvious difference is Adams's sophisticated management of hypotaxis and embedding (Halliday 1994a:215ff.; Martin et al.1997:165ff.). His 'sentence' (a clause complex made up of a primary clause and a hypotactic conditional clause), contains a variety of embedded and included clauses, enabling him to temporarily set aside elaborations and enhancements of his main proposition while moving towards his conclusion. The interviewer's comment shows his admiration for a speaker who can produce impromptu speech that sounds as though it might have been prepared in writing. It is unlikely that he had much difficulty transposing the taped interview material to the printed page. (But it is not *unmixed* admiration: the article contains hints of the suspicion that successful rhetoric habitually arouses; the feeling that Adams is not 'coming clean'.)

In punctuating this clause complex as a sentence the transcriber has either put in an unnecessary comma after 'violence' or left one out after 'establishment', so we cannot discover whether Gerry Adams is claiming that *some* establishments have built themselves up out of violence (embedded clause – defining relative) or whether, as seems more likely, he is referring to the Establishment, implying that *all* regimes in power have done this (included hypotactic clause – non-defining relative). It could be analysed into clauses using the following notation conventions:

[[ ]] for embedded clauses, and << >> for included

|| to mark clause boundaries, and ||| to mark clause complex boundaries:

11

A completely fair comparison would have Larry and Gerry answering the same question. The interviewer's question to Gerry is about 'whether it is more noble to be shot than to do the shooting'. In Labov (1969), Larry and Charles are not answering the same question. There is, however, perhaps some validity in the comparison between Larry's and Gerry's responses, because both use the interviewer's question as an excuse to speak up for the oppressed.

||| So if you find [[people in a partitioned Ireland << who are not treated as badly as people in South Africa>> << not as badly as the Jewish people were>> << not as badly as the Palestinian people>> resort to armed action << [[whether that is right or wrong]] is something else>>]]
|| then you find [[the establishment <<which has built itself out of violence>> depicts these people as terrorists]] |||

or (but less likely):

[[the establishment [[which has built itself out of violence]] depicts these people as terrorists]] |||

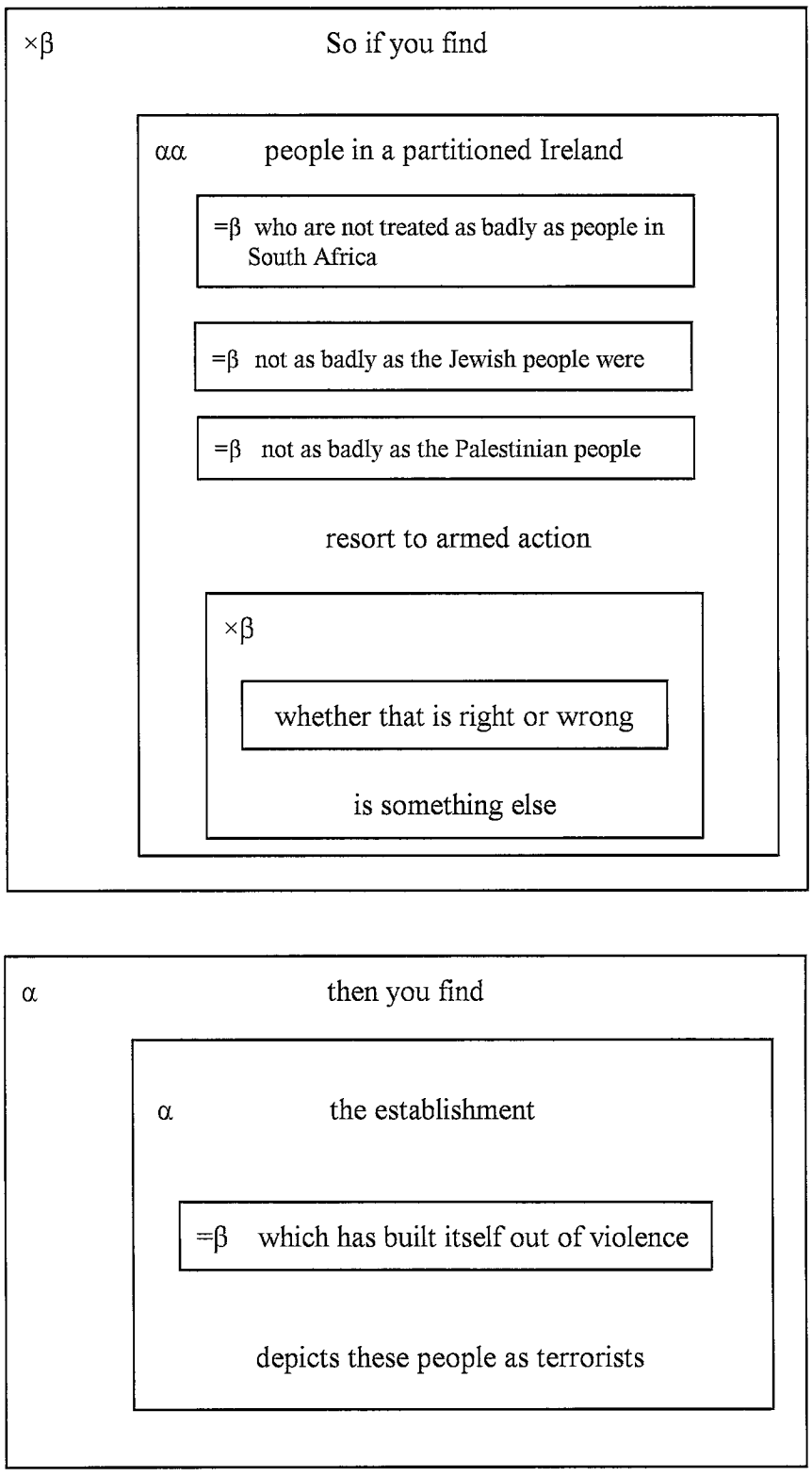
The sentence is not only complex but also elegant, creating a satisfying rhythm with the grammatical parallelism of its three relative clauses *who are not treated as badly*..., and the two *you find*s introducing the dependent and dominant clauses which contrast *the people* with *the Establishment*. Coincidentally, the interviewer's term *elaborate* is the one Halliday uses in verb form as a technical term for one variety of logico-semantic expansion. (The others are *extending* and *enhancing*, 1994a:219-20.) The expansions in Adams's inclusions and embeddings are of the elaborating variety (specifying in greater detail, exemplifying, commenting), and enhancing (adding a condition). FIGURE 4.1 shows details. I have chosen to analyse the two clauses *people in a partitioned Ireland ...whether that is right or wrong is something else*, and *the establishment which has built itself out of violence, depicts these people as terrorists* as embedded 'fact' clauses rather than projected clauses.[12]

12
It is difficult to decide whether the underlined clause in *'you find people in a partitioned Ireland ... resort to armed action'* and *'you find the establishment which has built itself out of violence, depicts these people as terrorists'* should be categorized as a 'fact' clause (embedded) or as a projection (a separate clause) (Halliday 1994a:264-9). Geoff Thompson observes that "find" is 'on the borderline between factive and non-factive' and 'unlike clear factive verbs like "regret" you can't easily insert "the fact that"'. He says his preference, given no particular purpose for the analysis, would be to analyse this clause as projected (personal communication October 2002). For the purpose of my analysis I have preferred to analyse it as embedded.

FIGURE 4.1 Hypotaxis, embedding and logico-semantic expansion in Gerry Adams's sentence

α dominant clause β dependent clause

= elaborating × enhancing (Halliday 1994a:219)



Larry has some control of hypotaxis and embedding – for example, *An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven, tha's bullshit*, (13):

||| An' [[when they be sayin'|| if you good, || you goin' t'heaven,]] tha's bullshit |||

– but this is not to say that his variety is equal to Adams's variety. We might say that he has the *potential* to develop full control of the resources the journalist interviewing Adams admires. To say that his speech has the same 'underlying rules' as Adams's is not to say very much. It is the degree of mastery that matters, as Labov seems to be suggesting when he talks about defective versions of SE. And there is more to it. Elaborate patterns of hypotaxis and embedding are not just soulless logic: mastery of them has interpersonal force as well, because they are valued by other language users. It is not only complexity but also subtlety that is admired: the way Labov's academic standard English disguises the inconsistency of his profiting from the elaborated discourse style whose value his theory is designed to deny. The enduring influence of his article in the linguistics community demonstrates the interpersonal power of the formal metalanguage: *The logic of nonstandard English* has gained the respect of this community although it does not really address the social issues it purports to address. On the other hand, Larry's kind of speech remains unvalued for serious purposes, despite Labov's spirited defence, because whatever its propositions are it does not have the interpersonal meanings the people in power look for. To achieve social mobility, Larry needs not so much to 'use his existing resources to stretch out' to meet new needs, as Hasan puts it, as to stretch his existing resources. (And in particular to learn the modalities that belong to different social contexts.) To say that what he already has is perfectly fine is not going to help him.

There is no denying the sincerity of Labov's defence of the Negro ghetto children, and it is impossible not to share his indignation at the treatment they received from educational psychologists bent on proving them genetically inferior to whites. His metalinguistic attention to the formal features of the NNE dialect accorded it the dignity of being shown to have a grammar like any other viable language ('For such knowledge of "Black English" as is available, teachers are more indebted to William Labov than to any other linguist', Sledd 1973:261). In the discussion that follows his paper he recognizes the necessity for children to be 'given every opportunity to learn the standard dialect... in order to have access to the scientific literature and to become a full member of the community' (41). However, because formal linguistic theory has

nothing to offer for investigation of the standard language's functional advantages, and political correctness prevents acknowledgement of these advantages, his article remains no more than supportive polemic. Labov is trying to defend an indefensible position. He has set everything up to favour the NNE speaker, but failed to answer the inevitable challenge about 'why not write in NNE' (15), which is not one that can be brushed aside, because it is the first line of attack from an ill-disposed reader:

> It seems to me that almost every day I turn on the radio in England this particular debate is being played out. On the one side the aesthetes and the normativists, grumbling about declining standards and on the other the "language is in rude health" brigade, celebrating diversity, etc. These positions are so well-known it is hard to raise any enthusiasm for another rerun. As an ironist in the Grauniad pointed out, the Rupert Murdoch Professor will be delivering her celebration of diversity in mainstream Received Pronunciation'. (Roger Blench, *Linguist* archives 7.218, 8 February, 1996, in response to the BBC Reith Lectures)

4.2 Missing the interpersonal dimension

This section examines in more detail the problems that arise from excluding the interpersonal dimension of meaning when we analyse texts, taking again the example of Labov (1969) and arguing that a theory that does not take it into account is not equipped to describe language believably or relate its findings to social problems.

There are several related problems here, all to do with how linguistic theory understands meaning. One is the idea that 'meaning is elsewhere'; in other words, meaning is independent of the forms and structures of language; which merely represent it, and can therefore be changed without changing the meaning. A prototypical expression of this belief is Fromkin and Rodman's 'Prescriptivists should be more concerned about the thinking of the speakers than about the language they use' (1993:15-16), which implies that an analyst can go straight to the meanings without considering the actual language. (That Labov subscribes to this belief is evident from the remark quoted above: 'words take the place of thought and nothing can be found behind them', 19.) Another is the idea that language expresses only one kind of meaning, the propositional, and that social meanings and values are 'extras', to be left out of the analysis of the language. Typical of this belief is the linguist's dismissal of people's positive and negative reactions to language as mere social convention. As Bolton and Hutton observe, 'when linguists dismiss lay linguistic

beliefs as irrational, this is done in a vacuum' (1995:181). That Labov subscribes to this belief is evident in his suggestion that respect for standard English is just social convention and in his assumption that he can dissuade people from taking offence at Larry's language simply by analysing its logical propositions. Another problem is forgetting that these are the *language users'* meanings. A sender and a receiver of the message are negotiating the joint construction of a text; it does not exist in a vacuum. The essential failing is the separating approach in linguistics: the linguist's attention to the language makes it a thing apart, deals with bits of it, and then fails to put the picture together again. It seems to me that all of these problems are evident in Labov's discussion of the speech of his two principle subjects, Larry and Charles.

Labov (1969) has become one of those iconic instances that people feel they know and can refer to without taking the trouble to have the article in front of them and check the details. For example, a contributor to the *Linguist List* debate mentioned in 2.2.4 says: 'I'm thinking, for example, of the passage in Labov's "The Logic of Non-Standard English" where Labov rightly but briefly and unelaboratedly makes judgements of literary excellence on the speech of two speakers' (10 June 1994, 5.680).[13] Labov was not referring to literary style: he was talking about logic, and incidentally about clarity versus vagueness. Pinker exhibits similar misremembrance of this paper when he talks about 'an interview conducted by the linguist William Labov on a stoop in Harlem'. In fact, Labov did not conduct the interview; a person called John Lewis did. (12). Pinker says that 'If the psychologists had listened to spontaneous conversations, they would have rediscovered the commonplace fact that American black culture is everywhere highly verbal' (1994:29). But the famous comments by Larry that Pinker goes on to quote were not in fact part of spontaneous conversation: they were elicited by a skilled interviewer.[14] An interview is not usually referred to as 'spontaneous conversation'.

13

The same contributor continues '...and the passage where he argues, again I think rightly but briefly, why SAE is a better medium for academic discourse than BEV', which again is something not demonstrated in Labov's 1969 article.

14

Pinker is also mistaken about the stoop. Labov refers in an endnote to an incident involving Larry, not being interviewed, but in an altercation with a landlord on the *steps* of a Harlem house (36, n.11). We are not told where the interview took place.

Pinker could be forgiven for this, because Labov himself seems to forget that there were two people involved. I believe the data collected from Larry and Charles is due for re-analysis. In the spirit of Singh's reworking of a piece of sociolinguistic analysis to show how taking a different angle on a dialogue can produce a very different picture (1996d), the following re-examines a section of Labov's study headed 'Verbosity', in which he is concerned to reverse the perceptions that middle-class educated verbal style is 'functional and desirable' and logical (12) and that the working-class undereducated verbal style is dysfunctional, undesirable and illogical. He does this by analysing data from *interviews* with his two subjects. The topic of Larry's interview is 'life after death' and Charles's is 'belief in witchcraft'. Labov's analysis shows up Larry's responses as 'quick, ingenious and decisive', logical and 'eminently quotable', and Charles's as verbose, imprecise, repetitive, empty and pretentious (11-22).

In Labov's analysis, the language of the socially disfavoured subject, Larry, is mediated through Labov's own speech in such a way as to make it appear admirable for its forthrightness, whereas the language of the socially favoured subject, Charles, is mediated in such a way as to focus on his hesitancy and hedging. Labov apparently overlooks the fact that he has used his own powerful and socially valued language forms to reconstrue what Larry is saying. In effect, the language he affirms is not Larry's but his own. I owe this insight to Honey (1997:27-35), who makes the point that we are reading Larry's words 'as interpreted by Labov', and similarly Charles's words as 'analysed adversely' by Labov (Honey1997:27). This way of looking at language as if it were 'really' something else is called 'cryptographic psychology' by Roy Harris: it is like seeing 'a text in a foreign language ... as "really written in English, but ... coded in some strange symbols"' (1987:77). It harks back to Plato's doctrine of Ideal Forms, which has reappeared in linguistics in the form of Chomsky's Deep Structure and allowed Labov to reword Larry's speech to show the underlying structure and then claim that his rewording is what Larry meant. Larry's actual words and the way he arranged them become unimportant: the analyst is free to add and subtract and rearrange. For example, Labov supplies Larry with the logical connector *Therefore* (Larry's own favourite is *'cause*) and ignores any of Larry's wording that is not strictly propositional. He overlooks the fact that the logical order he has imposed on Larry's text is a learned skill, the result of an education Larry has not had (or is rejecting).

Honey also points out that Larry's text consists of short remarks in response to probing questions by an interviewer – 'it is the interviewer who opens up a number of key stages of the argument'

– whereas Charles's is a longish unprompted speech – 'a sustained and extended answer to a single question' (1997:27). Labov claims that Larry's text is a sustained logical argument, but the argument is in fact a list of propositions extracted by Labov. He has not made it clear that half of the text is produced by Larry's interlocutor, the interviewer John Lewis, the other participant in the dialogue. In TABLE 4.2.1 I have juxtaposed Labov's version of Larry's argument (A) with the interviewer's questions (B) that Labov omits from his analysis.

TABLE 4.2.1 Labov's outline of Larry's argument, and the interviewer's questions

A	Labov's outline of Larry's argument (13-14). This approximately sums up Larry's answers to questions 1-8 in B.	B	The interviewer's questions (12-15), omitted from Labov's analysis.
(A) If you are good, (B) then your spirit will go to heaven		1	What happens to you after you die? Do you know?
(-A) If you are bad, (C) then your spirit will go to hell		2	What?
Larry denies (B), and asserts that if (A) or (-A), then (C)		3	What happens to your spirit?
		4	And where does the spirit go?
		5	On what? [This is a prompt following Larry's 'Well, it all depends...']
(1)	Everyone has a different idea of what God is like.	6	Why?
		7	Well, if there's no heaven, how could there be a hell?
(2)	Therefore nobody really knows that God exists.	8	This is hell?
(3)	If there is a heaven, it was made by God.	9	But, just say that there is a God, what color is he? White or black?
(4)	If God doesn't exist, he couldn't have made heaven.	10	But now, jus' suppose there was a God –
(5)	Therefore heaven does not exist.	11	No, I was jus' sayin' suppose there is a God, would he be white or black?
(6)	You can't go somewhere that doesn't exist.		
(– B)	Therefore you can't go to heaven.	12	Why?
(C)	Therefore you are going to hell.		

Interviewer John Lewis asks fourteen questions in twelve turns and Larry gives twelve responses (making up about 250 words from Larry). The style of this interview is suited to dealing with a schoolchild. Labov's paraphrase is a monologue: it gives all the credit to Larry. In the text with which Larry's language is compared, interviewer Clarence Robins asks Charles one question – 'Do you know of anything that someone can do, to have someone who has passed on visit him in a dream?' (16) – and Charles gives one response (of about 180 words), the first half of which is an answer to the question, and the second volunteered information. That style is suited to an interview with an adult, who might not need or expect constant prompting. The text Charles produces is rambling and inconclusive, but it is a response to just one question. Moves in a

dialogue are different from sustained monologue, so the two texts are not strictly comparable: Larry's and Charles's productions need to be treated as different genres.

Larry's assertion that God is white seems to be the result of quite persistent leading by the interviewer in questions 9, 10 and 11. Once we refocus attention on the questions it is evident that the interviewer plays a large part in the direction the argument takes. As Asp points out, 'interrogatives control any interraction' (2000:41). The interviewer in effect provides Larry with several of the Themes of his argument:

	Interviewer	**Larry**
1	What happens to you after you die?	After they put you in the ground...
3	What happens to your spirit?	Your spirit leaves you.
9	But, just say that there is a God,	Well, if it is a God...
11	... would he be white or black?	He'd be white, man.

The chief elements of Larry's method of development[15] are clearly there in the interviewer's questions: *life after death*; *spirit*; *heaven and hell*; *God*; *what colour is God* ? It is a moot point whether Larry would have reached the interesting conclusion 'it ain't no white God that's doin' that bullshit' (15) without the interviewer leading him to that point. In contrast, Charles is given no help beyond his first Theme: Do you know of anything...? Well, I even heard ... (16).

Omitting the questioner's role in producing a text can have legal consequences. Asp comments on a real-life incident in which a police document claiming to be a verbatim account of what a defendant had said was thrown out of court as inadmissible evidence when linguists Gregory and Asp pointed out this omission:

> The experiential and organisational selections in the text are the consequence of what the text is, the gist of an interview in which the interrogatives have been suppressed. Interactionally it is real nonsense, a fabrication. Or as Gregory put it when in the stand and as the papers gleefully reported, it's "a fiction". The text

15

The 'method of development' is the set of Themes in a text (Fries 1981; Martin 1992; Halliday 1994a;). It is the way a speaker 'establishes an angle on the field' (Martin 1992:489).

> only contains declarative sentences shaped of course by interrogatives that we have had to guess at. (Asp 2000:41)

She explains why it is misleading to claim one's own rewording is what the speaker really said:

> The result of conflating questions and answers into a series of statements is a gist with the normal properties of gists. It is in the register and dialect configuration of the person who authors it ... [it] includes experiential information which its author sees as relevant (information which helps establish the case) and excludes information not seen as relevant. ... In terms of the textual or organisational function, gist statements also represent the interests of their authors rather than those of the person or people whose story they relate. (2000:38)

Labov's approach is similar to the police reporter's: looking only for propositions, and in so doing taking possession of them. Ironically, while ostensibly valuing Larry's performance, Labov has set up his own as the real thing of value. He has felt at liberty to impose his own textual organisation on Larry's text because the linguistic theory he bases his analysis on does not treat textual organisation as a meaning-making resource. Nor does this theory take into account the interpersonal meaning, and so he has also omitted this from his analysis. These changes and omissions alter the text to such an extent that it can no longer be considered Larry's own production, and – what is more serious – they draw attention away from the need to teach the difficult skills of coherent organisation and appropriate modality.

Analysis via paraphrase is a hazardous technique. Hodge and Kress (1993[1979]:65ff.) describe a paper from a 'Language and Class' workshop in which an academic paraphrases a working-class woman's speech to justify claims about the effectiveness of working-class speech for discussing the country's economic and social order. Ironically, the academic's own text, juxtaposed with that of the subject's, only serves to highlight the inadequacy of the working-class woman's language for this kind of discussion. Her grammar allows her to talk about what happened to her personally, but does not give her the range to extrapolate to wider social issues the way the academic can. (This is of course not to say that her account is not valuable; it is valuable in the same way that Orwell's highly personalized social commentary – for example in his *Collected Essays*, 1968 – is valuable.) In the academic's comment that the working-class speaker can 'handle disagreement in a tolerant and constructive way', the word 'disagreement' is the academic's nominalization (and hence summing-up so that general conclusions can be drawn to suit a wide range of instances) of the woman's words *we did have a bit of a battle* ...

we demanded... We got it... we just refused... we knew ... we won... we got (a long story detailing how the participants in the dispute acted). As Hodge and Kress put it, 'to justify working-class language to middle-class (especially academic) readers, she has to translate the phenomena into terms they would understand, into their system of categories, their language. This inevitably eliminates the original system of categories' (1993[1979]:67).

If we re-focus on the interpersonal elements of Labov's two texts this changes the picture. Charles is criticised by Labov for his 'filler phrases ... such a thing as; some things like that; particularly (16-17) and 'a proliferation of "I think", of the passive, of modals and auxiliaries, of the first person pronoun, of uncommon words' – all of which Labov refers to as 'the bench marks of hemming and hawing, backing and filling' (19). But he does not remark on Larry's 'fillers': *an' shit* (2 instances), *Well, it all depends*; *Well, bullshit! I'll tell you why*; *I couldn' say*; *you know / y'know* (4 instances); *I mean* (2 instances), *Yeah / ye-eah* (2 instances); *let me tell you*; *man*; *you dig*; *Y'understan'?* (12-15). In fact, Labov states that Larry does not 'insert meaningless verbiage' (15). He has apparently not treated Larry's fillers as part of Larry's language at all, but verbiage like this is only meaningless to a theory that takes a narrow view of meaning.

It could even be argued that since the two interviews were informal their *main* function was interpersonal rather than propositional. In the first part of the article Labov describes the failure of excessively structured and stiff interviews to elicit natural data from NNE-speaking children, and he describes methods of creating more informal conditions – sitting on the child's level, sharing snacks, licensing rude words. The interview with Larry seems to have been conducted informally – we are given a big enough sample of the data to see this. Whether the interview with Charles was of this kind is hard to tell, because the extract consists of only one question and one response. If informality was the object, then this makes Labov's inattention to the interpersonal meaning the more surprising, as this would be the kind of meaning privileged in a friendly chat.

Because his theory does not admit the 'fillers' as part of the language, Labov does not compare the different types Charles and Larry use. Taking the interpersonal function into account produces a different picture, as White points out:

> Under the individualistic ... model, a modal value such as 'maybe' or 'I think that...' is seen as acting to indicate uncertainty or lack of commitment to, or

> confidence in the truth values by the individual speaker – it is seen as epistemological, as a reflex of the speaker's current state of knowledge with respect to some propositional content. Under the heteroglossic perspective, rather than necessarily reflecting the speaker's state of knowledge, it can additionally or alternatively be seen as signalling that the meanings at stake are subject to heteroglossic negotiation. It may have no connection at all with doubt or vagueness, being used, instead, to acknowledge the contentiousness of a particular proposition, the willingness of the speaker to negotiate with those who hold a different view, or the deference of the speaker for those alternative views. (2001:16)

Taking the heteroglossic point of view suggests that Charles's hesitations can be analysed as polite negotiation rather than woolly-mindedness. He has learned an essential language skill that Larry signally lacks (Larry is only 15 years old, after all). His interpersonal signals allow for other opinions, and invite input from his interlocutor: *I personally...*; *I don't think that it's just a matter of...*; *I don't particularly believe*; *I do feel, though...*; *...there is such a thing*; *...that could actually be considered*, but Larry keeps the stage to himself: *I'll tell you why*; *let me tell you*; *man*; *you dig*; *Y'understan'?* Charles's fillers are the face-saving kind (his own face and the interlocutor's), whereas Larry's are the slap-in-the-face variety (he doesn't care about anybody's face). Paradoxically, Charles's preference for the first person pronoun (*I think*, *I feel*) could be interpreted as ability to relate to the other person (these are only *his* views – the other person may think differently), and Larry's for the second person as a manifestation of self-centredness (determination to impose his views on his interlocutor). Labov himself begins to use some 'extra verbiage' when challenged by a participant in the discussion following his paper (17) – *I think* (4 instances), *I guess*, *I hope*, *I am sure* (40-41) – which is not characteristic of his written style. (Labov's interpersonal metaphor is examined in more detail in 4.3, below.)

Labov fails to analyse the data from the interpersonal point of view because he is relying on a linguistic theory that provides no tools for technical description of this facet of natural language. That he does not believe there is such a thing as interpersonal meaning is evident from his comment that a list of expressions such as *I feel* can be omitted from Charles's text 'without change in meaning' (17). Where he does give explicit technical description is in the detailed formal analysis of Larry's text at *sentence* level (features of NNE, with examples given for each: negative inversion, negative concord, invariant *be*, optional copula deletion, and full forms of auxiliaries, 13), but he does not use an equivalent explicit metalanguage to describe the *text* as a whole.

Smitherman is one who has remarked on the inadequacy of formal linguistics to account for Black English as a social reality:

> Now there do be linguists who supposedly done did this categorization and definition of BE. But the descriptions are generally confining, limited as they are to discrete linguistic units. ... rarely does one find an investigation of the total vitality of black expressive style, a style inextricable from the Black Cultural Universe, for after all B[lack] I[diom] connects with Black Soul, and niggers is more than deleted copulas. (1980:159-60)

Evidence of the extent to which Labov is caught up in the transformational generative grammar style of the day is his assertion (unsupported by any evidence) that 'Negro children in the urban ghettos ... hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children' (2). Later he returns to this statement and says that 'Our own studies of the 'Grammaticality of Everyday Speech' show that the great majority of utterances in all contexts are complete sentences, and most of the rest can be reduced to grammatical form by a small set of 'editing rules' (19). He seems unaware of the implications of this statement: that the language is as the analyst says it is once the analyst has changed it into something else.[16] He plainly does not 'trust the text' (Sinclair 1994).

Labov's ostensible purpose in writing this paper was to show that non-standard English is as logical as standard. As evidence of this he uses formal linguistic analysis to show that the Deep Structure of NNE is the same as SE. A secondary purpose, however, evident throughout the article, is a desire to show that middle-class standard English is inferior to NNE. Labov is plainly as bothered as any ordinary language user by pretentious empty talk of the kind targeted by the writers of usage handbooks, for example, Bruton-Simmonds:

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I leave aside the failure to define 'sentence' satisfactorily, let alone 'well-formed'. If we define 'sentence' as a construct of writing, as observed in 4.1, above, then it is not sentences that we hear, but clauses and clause complexes. Anyone who has transcribed spoken language knows how difficult it can be to decide where sentences should begin and end in the transcribed version. As to 'well-formed', this is a grammaticality judgement that in effect means 'conforming to the grammar of written language', and not to that of spoken. Labov's remark is evidence of a 'scriptist' position: 'the assumption that writing is a more ideal form of linguistic representation than speech' (Roy Harris 1980:6). Speech is analysed as though it were an ill-formed version of writing, which is ironic in view of orthodox linguistics' assertions that speech is primary but, as Harris observes, 'insistence in principle on the "primacy of speech" is no prophylactic against the temptation to analyse speaking as if it were writing' (1980:13).

> almost any Cockney bus conductor or English farm labourer with not much Latinate English but with customary straightforwardness and fine colloquial ear speaks far better English and has incomparably keener understanding of anything he cares to put his mind to than the stock English-speaking sociology graduate, who has a jumble of jargon Latinate and some ostentatious mathematics quite unfitted to his vague intellect: the working-men think and *hear* in clear English, the other flounders in a quagmire. (1990:91)

Having no technical language to express these complaints, because they are to do with interpersonal issues and value rather than syntax and logic, Labov resorts to lay metalanguage, the language typical of the Orwell-influenced layperson irritated at bureaucratic maundering. In TABLE 4.2.2, Labov's evaluations of Charles's and Larry's texts are compared with comments by a fictional character on two similarly contrasted texts. (This character seems to me a faithful representation of the typical 'word-worrier': the kind of reader targeted by the usage handbooks. More detail from this fictional work is supplied in **Appendix 2** and it is commented on further in Chapter Nine.)

The point of the comparison in TABLE 4.2.2 is to show that Labov's language here is very similar to the language typical of evaluative/prescriptive complaints about usage, relying on attitudinal lexis (underlined) and metaphor (italicised) and devoid of technical vocabulary. This might not matter very much if the lay metalanguage were adequate to elucidate subtle differences between texts and in explicit terms. Roy Harris has expressed extreme cynicism about the linguist's understanding of language – 'A linguistic theorist speaks with no greater authority and insight about language than a baker or bus-conductor' – but he does grant that the linguist has the edge in that 'the theorist speaks with greater circumspection' (1997:237), which I take to mean with subtlety and accuracy, rather than making rash pronouncements. While Labov's analysis of the underlying similarity between the syntax of NNE and SE is subtle and technically explicit, his discussion of the difference between Larry's and Charles's styles is no more subtle or technical than Bruton-Simmonds's or Inspector Morse's.

TABLE 4.2.2 The linguist's and the layperson's evaluations of English usage

Labov comments on two texts.	*Inspector Morse comments on two texts.*[17]
Text 1 Charles ...turgid, redundant and empty ... Many academic writers try to rid themselves of that part of middle-class style that is empty pretension, and keep that part that is needed for precision. But the average middle-class speaker that we encounter makes no such effort; he is *enmeshed* in verbiage, the victim of sociolinguistic factors beyond his control. (12) ...the primary characteristic of this passage – its verbosity. Words *multiply*, some modifying and qualifying, others repeating or *padding* the main argument (16) ...a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague. *The accumulating flow of words buries rather than strikes the target.* (19)	Text 1 Sociology A few years ago he might possibly have considered persevering with such incomprehensible twaddle. But no longer. Stopping momentarily only to marvel at the idiocy of the publisher who had allowed such pompous polysyllaby ever to reach the compositor in the first place, he closed the stout work smartly – and resolved never to open it again (207) ...the *sprawling*, *spawning*, sociological nonsense he had just encountered (207) The author was still most horribly *enmeshed in his barbed-wire* style, still quite incapable of calling a spade anything else but a broad-bladed digging-tool, but the message was clear enough. (265)
Text 2 Larry he can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and *the full force of his opinions comes through* without qualification or reservation... many concise statements (13) Larry's answer is quick, ingenious and decisive (14) speed and precision... clear and effective (15)	Text 2 Popular fiction Morse opened the book and skimmed (though a little more slowly than before) a second paragraph that evening. And he was immediately aware of a no-nonsense, clear-cut English style *that was going to take the palm* every time from the sprawling, spawning, sociological nonsense he had just encountered (207)

17

Colin Dexter, 1993, *The Wench is Dead*, London: Pan, pp.207-65. Fictional detective Inspector Morse comments on extracts from a work in criminology, *Scales of Injustice: A Comparative Study of Crime and its Punishment as Recorded in the County of Shropshire, 1842-1852* and a pornographic paperback: *The Blue Ticket.* (Both extracts are pastiches by Dexter).

Besides missing the interpersonal meaning of the two speakers' texts, Labov's theory also provides no help in *evaluating* them. He can say that one is better than the other just as emphatically as Inspector Morse can, but he can provide no technical back-up for the assertion, partly because his theory does not provide the technical tools to do so, and partly because orthodox linguistics vetoes evaluative comparison, so that a linguist who wants to voice an opinion like this is restricted to speaking as an ordinary lay language user. The result for the linguist has to be a split personality.

4.3 Developing a split personality

In this section I observe some of the problems that result from the linguist's schizophrenia and the subterfuges it necessitates: restricting oneself to description and treating application as someone else's business (4.3.1); keeping the two roles of linguistic theorist and advisor on language matters separate (4.3.2); and dividing evaluations into 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' varieties, so as to address the former and ignore the latter (4.3.3).

4.3.1 Opting out

The excerpts quoted in **Appendix 2** from three of the introductory texts discussed in section 2.3, Hockett (1958), Crystal (1971), and Lyons (1981), recommend that linguists restrict themselves to description and leave applications to others. All three emphasize the linguist's separateness from other language users and indeed, in Lyons's account, even from himself as ordinary language user. All three recommend ways of abdicating responsibility for what the consumer does with the descriptions the linguist produces. Hockett suggests that the linguist should accept that other social scientists are 'better prepared' (i.e. better qualified?) to explain why people consider particular usages to be correct, and he makes it clear that he sees behaviour patterns and social values as 'secondary' and somehow detached from language. By the same token it will presumably not matter that the sociologist and anthropologist do not have specialised knowledge of language,[18] as he seems to envisage a complete split between language and social behaviour.

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18 As Hymes points out, 'Sociologists have mostly studied language in ways that do not require linguistics ... one need only say that one language is different from another to have discussed language in general' (1983:184).

He does not suggest *who* might be called on to advise on language usage, should people ask for such advice. Crystal, in a strangely contradictory passage, states that the linguist *is* qualified to know what kinds of language are suited to which situations, but that it is not his business to explain these connections: he must 'leave others to decide'. Nevertheless, it *is* his business to tell people when their judgements about these matters are 'naïve' and 'egocentric'. In other words, he may tell them where they go wrong but not how to put things right. Lyons, using an extremely distancing form of modality (perhaps to deny involvement in the belief systems of prescriptivists), 'concedes that it might be possible, in principle' to find differences between varieties of language and evaluate their relative effectiveness for various purposes but, like Crystal, implies that the only way the linguist may be involved in this exercise is to tell people when they have gone wrong ('cannot but report ... that most of the judgements that are made about such matters are extremely subjective'). He does not say how the linguist is to square it with himself that to teach his children 'correct' usage flies in the face of his professional beliefs. What exactly will he tell his children? Will he keep his 'honesty' to himself, or will he tell them that producing 'correct' forms is just something we have to cynically go along with for the moment, in order to secure social advantages, all the while hoping that one day society will come to its senses and realise that all forms of language are equally good?

These twenty-, thirty- and forty-year-old remarks would be irrelevant were it not that the same essentially unworkable approach is still being recommended in more recent introductory books. Napoli, for example, presents the contradiction as a positive benefit: 'if you are someone who has been careful to speak "properly" or "grammatically", you may continue to speak as you always did, but you will be disabused of the misconception that any one form of speech is more proper than another' (1996:vii). This suggestion invites questions: for example, what is implied by Napoli's modality? Is she giving you *permission* to go on being careful? It seems odd that a non-prescriptive linguist should see this as part of her role. Or is she suggesting that anti-prescriptive linguistics *may or may not* affect the way you use language? If learning linguistics makes you decide to be careless with it, that might be seen by some as a bad thing. And how will this advice affect the student who has *not* 'been careful to speak [or write] "properly" or "grammatically"', but knows these skills are necessary to achieve social goals and for personal growth and goes to linguistics for help? No doubt Napoli would say this is not what you learn linguistics for, but since she has brought up the subject of students' everyday use of language, she owes it to them to outline some coherent policy, including what they are to do when they are

asked to give advice on correct language and have not been equipped to do this but rather warned off the whole endeavour.

The three paragraphs in Appendix 2 base their stance on the assumption that there exists an entity called 'language' which can be isolated from its social use. All three express a naive confidence in the linguist's ability to be completely objective about language and uninfluenced by his or her own values, and their tone of calm assurance glosses over the inevitable 'split personality' that must result from trying to follow their advice while engaging in activities that require the linguist to take on a social role.

4.3.2 The objective scientist and the social commentator

Linguists are obliged to 'wear two hats'. Having accepted that evaluative and advisory activities are not the concern of a scientist, yet being obliged to get involved, they have to find a modus vivendi – a way to combine the roles of objective scientist and social commentator. One possibility, as Hockett suggests, is to treat *analysing* language and *using* language as two separate activities. This means alternating between the two roles, at one moment describing the language as a scientist and at the next offering advice as an ordinary language user. One result of this is writing in which there are two distinct voices, as TABLE 4.3.2.1 shows:

TABLE 4.3.2.1 Two voices in Labov (1969)

A the objective linguistic scientist	B the ordinary language user (with traditional school grammar background)
the deletion of the *is* or *are* in nonstandard Negro English is not the result of illogical or erratic behavior: it follows the same regular rules of standard English contraction. ... no such deletion is possible in positions where standard English cannot contract: just as one cannot say *That's what they're* in standard English, *That's what they* is equally impossible in the vernacular we are considering. The internal constraints upon both of these rules show that we are dealing with a phonological process like contraction, sensitive to such phonetic conditions as whether or not the next word begins with a vowel or a consonant. (20)	we often fail to achieve the explicitness and precision which we look for ... . All too often, 'standard English' is represented by a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague. The accumulating flow of words buries rather than strikes the target. It is this verbosity which is most easily taught and most easily learned ... .we are presented with a proliferation of 'I think', of the passive, of modals and auxiliaries, of the first person pronoun, of uncommon words; these are the benchmarks of hemming and hawing, backing and filling ... devices which often obscure whatever positive contribution education can make to our use of language (19)

Presented with the above and asked to name their genres, one might reasonably guess that A is from a work in formal theoretical linguistics and B from a popular handbook on Plain English.[19] These are not voices in harmony, but neither are they exactly in conflict; they are different genres. It is not as though A is description of the data and B the subsequent analysis; they seem rather to be coming from two different directions. The technical passage (A) aims to prove the essential sameness of varieties (NNE and SE) at sentence level (the level formal linguistics deals with), implying that they have equal value; while the informal attitudinal passage (B) aims to prove that SE is different from NNE at text level (the level of discourse analysis), implying that it is not as good. In Labov (1969), the sentence-level analysis (voice A) of SE and NNE is conducted in the technical language of formal linguistics (*deletion*, *contraction*, *constraints*, *phonological*), whereas the text-level analysis (voice B) of the language of Larry and Charles is non-technical; or at best moderately technical (*passive*, *modals*, *auxiliaries*, *first person pronoun*): there is nothing in it that a writer of complaint-style usage handbooks could not say. The sentence-level analysis aims at proving *equality*; while the text-level analysis aims at proving *difference*. The two forms of analysis have nothing to say to each other, and the discontinuity is jarring. If we try to put the two together the argument becomes incoherent. What can it mean to say that two varieties are the same, but different? Or to say that they are equal in value, yet that one is better than the other?

Because Labov does not address these questions, which would entail probing the validity of the *competence/performance* distinction that his analysis depends on, the only way to read this article, as most readers no doubt do, is to split yourself into two readers: a formal linguist, to understand the technical discussion, and an ordinary citizen, to be moved to righteous indignation at the plight of the stigmatized Negro schoolchildren and the pretentiousness of middle-class speakers. This is not a satisfactory solution for anyone who would like to see linguistics and social commentary working together as a coherent enterprise.

Labov's comment (referred to in 4.1, above) that he hoped his audience did not think he was 'implying that the child should not be taught standard English' and his assertion that he was in favour of giving every child 'the opportunity to learn the standard dialect... in order to have

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19 This was indeed the guess made by several colleagues who were shown the two unlabelled texts, apart from one educationalist who immediately recognized Labov (1969).

access to the scientific literature and to become a full member of the community' (1969:41) are evidence of the difficulty. He can say this in his own capacity as a 'full member' of that community, but as a linguist he cannot say it directly or offer any theoretical or empirical support for it: the person writing the paper and the person discussing it informally after the presentation do not seem to be the same person.

Support for my view that the split personality syndrome is produced *by the theory itself* comes from a paper in the same volume as Labov's1969 article, in which Stewart points out that Labov 'is forced' to consider a sentence from his own NNE data as an 'unsolved puzzle' (1969:242), because his theoretical position does not give him a way to interpret it. By treating NNE as a different kind of grammar from SE, necessitating a different kind of approach, instead of as a surface manifestation of the same deep structure as SE, Stewart is able to provide a convincing explanation. His suggestion about the analysis of a puzzling contraction in this NNE sentence is that 'this Negro-dialect distinction, which obviously goes deeper than mere surface phonology, is difficult to relate to standard English in any credible way' (1969:243), and he suggests that 'Apparently, Labov was prohibited from considering this possibility by his theory of the standard-English-like nature of Negro-dialect zero copula, since standard English would not contract *is* in this position in the sentence under consideration' (1969:243). Stewart's explanation of Labov's problem is worth quoting in some detail, because it encapsulates the dilemma that the all-languages-are-equal, anti-prescriptive approach leads linguists into:

> It is precisely because Labov's research on Negro speech has generally been so thorough and insightful that I regard his explanation of the use by Negroes of *me*, etc., in subject position and his analysis of Negro-dialect copula as inconsistent with his usual healthy views. Labov makes a strong case for the structural and logical integrity of Negro dialect, but then would agree with Bereiter in principle if not in degree that a sentence like *Me got juice* would represent language pathology if heard from an adult. Labov demonstrates that Negro dialect has its own system of grammatical and phonological rules, but would explain the Negro-dialect use of the copula as essentially standard-English-like. And the worst part is that he ignores counter evidence which is available in his own data and conclusions. (Stewart 1969:243)

The 'counter-evidence' is the NNE sentence that Labov sets aside as an 'unsolved puzzle'.[20] This is another manifestation of the split personality problem: the generative linguist persona is unable to explain data that his commonsense everyday persona, assuming him to be familiar with the intonation of African American Vernacular English, would have little difficulty in explaining. It is a matter of admitting that they make their meanings differently from us. Ironically, Labov himself, in a discussion following another paper in this journal, recognizes this problem and warns against it: 'your general approach to theory seems to me essentially one of reducing your data into a form that will fit Chomsky's model' (Alatis 1969:171).

Another example of a linguist caught in the same bind as Labov – being obliged to explain the contradiction between his personal and professional views on standard English – occurs in the popular work *The Language Instinct* (1994). The author acts out a little drama in which prescriptivist persona meets linguist persona and the latter triumphs:

> Finally, a confession. When I hear someone use *disinterested* to mean "apathetic", I am apt to go into a rage. *Disinterested* (I suppose I must explain that it means "unbiased") is such a lovely word: it is ever-so-subtly different from *impartial* or *unbiased* in implying that the person has no stake in the matter, not that he is merely committed to being even-handed out of personal principle. (Pinker1994:402)[21]

Following this is further discussion of the 'fine meaning' of the word, and a comparison with similarly constructed words, such as *disillusioned*, ending with the comment that 'Since we already have the word *uninterested*, there can be no reason to rob discerning language lovers of *disinterested* by merging their meanings, except as a tacky attempt to sound more high-falutin''. The next paragraph begins 'Chill out, Professor', and Pinker then goes on to make a case against his own preference for the 'correct' use of the word by referring to historical precedent (eighteenth-century use of *disinterested* to mean "uninterested"); by pointing out that *interested*

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The 'puzzle' sentence – which attention to intonation and taking into account the 'deleted' *is* makes intelligible – is: *I'm onna say why what they say you have to have* [is] *a high school diploma* (Stewart 1969:242).

21

In my observation, while linguists are eager to criticise *syntactic* shibboleths, such as those involving split infinitives, or pronoun case, they are less keen to attack the *semantic* ones, as they may themselves, like Pinker, be quite fond of the distinction between *uninterested* and *disinterested* and others of that ilk, and perhaps even want their students to be aware of them.

(verbal use, meaning "engaged") is more common than *interest* (nominal use, meaning "stake"); and finally by claiming that 'these rationalizations are beside the point" and that the important thing is to accept that language changes and that 'the richness of a language is always being replenished' (1994:402). (He does not, however, suggest anything to replace *disinterested* used in its correct sense, and this I believe is a serious omission, given that he has already said that *impartial* and *unbiased* are unsatisfactory synonyms. To be obliged to resort to an imprecise substitute, or perhaps use an explanatory phrase, seems to me an impoverishment of the language rather than enrichment.)

Pinker's attempt to show he understands and even shares the layperson's point of view is an important tactic in a popularizer. However, analysis of his language here shows him less rhetorically confident than is his wont. Despite claiming the distinction is not important, he confesses that he himself does consider it so – is in fact sufficiently bothered by it to 'go into a rage' – and has to chide himself for this ('Chill out, Professor'). At the point where he finds himself obliged to reconcile his scientist's persona with his ordinary educated language user's dislike of inaccurate word use he lapses into interpersonal grammatical metaphor:[22] '*I suppose* I must explain that it means "unbiased"'. Interpersonal metaphor is typically found at points where the writer or speaker feels the need to increase or decrease Engagement[23] with the proposition. It is fairly rare in Pinker's writing, which for the most part is brusquely congruent, consisting largely of unhedged categorical statements. There is not much interpersonal metaphor, so where it does occur we can perhaps take it as significant. The following are some of the few examples I could find: '*I hope* to offer something different from the airy platitudes ... that typify discussions of language' (1994:8); '*I think* it is fruitful to consider language as an evolutionary adaptation ... *I think* that a conclusion about the mind is convincing only if many kinds of evidence converge on it' (1994:24; two on one page is particularly rare);'*I hope* to have convinced you of two things' (1994:400).

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Halliday 1994a:354-367.

23

This term from APPRAISAL theory refers to 'systems which adjust a speaker's commitment to what he or she is saying' (Martin 2000a:147-8).

Thompson explains that this kind of wording is regarded as metaphorical because 'there is a tension between the grammatical dominance of the modal clause (which is the main clause in traditional terms) and the semantic dominance of the "reported" clause' and 'any tag clause picks up the Mood of that clause rather than the Mood of the modal clause' (1996:173): *I suppose I must explain, mustn't I? *don't I?* A discourse analyst is not a psychologist, and we do not want to read too much into this, but it seems to me fair to say that the grammatical tension, coupled with the rarity of the form in Pinker's writing, indicates that something is going on here: he seems less than his usual confident self at this point.[24] His problem is that he has to somehow reconcile the objective scientist persona (oriented to the experiential) with the subjective layperson persona (oriented to the interpersonal). It is not the linguist's usual task to explain prescriptive differences in word meanings, and especially not to express a preference for the 'correct' one. Pinker in congruent mood, sure of his role, could be expected, on the basis of his usual grammatical choice, to state simply 'It means...'. The interpersonal metaphor in this instance decreases engagement with the proposition; as if to say 'This is not the real me speaking' or 'I don't really want to take responsibility for this'. Pinker's rhetoric is so skilful that rather than reading this as bad faith we are likely to be charmed by his honesty.

Labov's modality seems to me similarly significant at the point (discussed in detail in 4.1, above) where he finds himself in the same dilemma as Pinker: obliged to acknowledge the awkwardness of dismissing the value of standard English while plainly profiting from it. Labov's discourse, like Pinker's, is interpersonally congruent for the most part, so metaphorical usage may indicate a certain tension: the choice of wording will be functional, as any marked choice is. His use of *It seems likely* to preface his remark about 'explicit analysis of surface forms' (15) stands out as marked in the context of the whole 38-page text. Firstly, the word *seems* calls attention to itself: like Pinker, Labov is a writer more fond of *is* than *seems* ('The most useful service which linguists can perform today *is* to clear away the illusion of "verbal deprivation"', 2; 'The fundamental reason *is*, of course, one of firmly fixed social conventions', 15; 'The chief problem *is* ignorance of language on the part of all concerned', 34). Secondly, the interpersonal metaphor

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More characteristic of Pinker's style is the bare declarative: 'Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture'; 'A part of speech, then, is not a kind of meaning; it is a kind of token that obeys certain formal rules'; All infants come into the world with linguistic skills'(1994:18;106;263).

is marked: there are only eight other examples, which I have listed in TABLE 4.3.2.2 and grouped according to two types of modality identified by Halliday (1994a:357).

TABLE 4.3.2.2 Modality in Labov (1969)

Modalization (probability and usuality) Propositions		Modulation (obligation and inclination) Proposals	
Objective			
it is probable that you would not like him any more than his teachers do (12)	probably	*it seems to us necessary* to look at the social and cultural obstacles (28)	required
It can certainly be said that Boot and David fail the test (24)	certainly	*it is important* to realize that we are dealing with special pleading (30)	required
But it is also true that these boys understand the standard sentence (24)	certainly		
it may seem that the fallacies of the verbal deprivation theory are so obvious (34)	possibly		
Subjective			
I need not emphasize that this is an absurd interpretation (22)	certainly		
I doubt if we can teach people to be logical (25)	probably not		

Of these eight examples, only two are the subjective variety which emphasizes ownership of the proposition/proposal (*I need not*; *I doubt*). The others are the objective variety which suggests it is not just the author's opinion, and indeed each of these six examples does preface a proposition or a proposal whose truth seems evident (such as the fact that you would not like Larry).[25] The truth of the proposition *that SE has an advantage over NNE in explicit analysis of surface forms* is, as I have suggested in 4.1, above, not at all evident, because it is phrased so vaguely as to make it difficult to know *what* truth it is supposed to be. It has, however, been made to seem an *obvious* truth by being prefaced by *It seems likely*. The unmarked function of the objective interpersonal metaphor is to indicate a truth so self-evident as to need no discussion. However, the problem of how to explain his own choice of SE while claiming it has no

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'For most readers of this paper, first contact with Larry would produce some fairly negative reactions on both sides: it is probably that you would not like him any more than his teachers do. Larry causes trouble in and out of school; he was put back from the eleventh grade to the ninth, and has been threatened with further action by the school authorities' (Labov 1969:12).

advantage does need discussion, but it cannot be discussed, because this would reveal the split personality syndrome that lies behind it. So the usage of the objective modality here is 'bogus', i.e. mimicking its real function: it serves to disguise uncertainty as certainty, improbability as probability. And it is likely to convince the reader, because the other instances, which serve the unmarked function, provide 'camouflage'.

It looks as though both Pinker and Labov experienced some rhetorical awkwardness at the point where they were forced to 'wear both hats at once'. When a writer whose style is as straightforward and outspoken as theirs, i.e. whose interpersonal grammatical choices are usually congruent, uncharacteristically makes a grammatical choice that is 'not ... the most straightforward coding of the meanings selected' (Halliday 1994a:366), then the discourse analyst may be justified in thinking that some tension is being experienced. In the examples from Labov's and Pinker's texts the tension appears to be caused by the misfit between the dictates of orthodox theory and their own personal evaluation of language.

4.3.3 Selective prescriptivism

Aware of the lack of fit between theory and practice, other linguists, such as Aitchison and the Milroys, have tried a different tactic, which is to license *some* kinds of prescriptivism, specifically those they feel most comfortable with, as being compatible with their own ideology, or simply unavoidable. One of these is mentioned by Hudson amongst the 'issues on which linguists can agree': 'Spelling is probably the most immutable part of English, and the part where prescriptivism is most easily accepted by linguists' (1981:341).

In the BBC Reith Lectures, Aitchison makes the expected anti-prescriptive pronouncements. She insists that the 'cobweb of worries' that 'envelops all of language' (1997:2) must be removed, because 'Nature forces humans to weave the language web in a particular way, whatever language they speak' and 'humpback whales alter their songs every year, and nobody has complained' (2). However, in the last lecture she claims that 'Language worries worth worrying about do exist' (81); that there are 'some genuine concerns' (95). These are: 'gobbledegook ... pretentious or unintelligible jargon' (81); the 'language trap' (the way 'humans are subconsciously trapped by their language' – here she gives some credit to (a popularized version of) Whorf's ideas (84); the use of generic *he* (86); the hidden influence of metaphor – 'Watch

out for clever metaphors which might bend your mind' (92); and finally, what seems to be the biggest worry of all, 'language loss' – 'Ninety percent of the world's languages may be in danger' (95). She does not, however, explain how linguistics might be used to help deal with these concerns; for example, in reference to the 'gobbledegook' she comments only that 'lucid speaking and writing require time and practice' and that 'Good communicators are like cooks squeezing a lemon' (84). Nor does she explain why linguists should legitimize these particular worries but not others, or where the line is to be drawn. However, she advises us to take heed of A.P. Herbert's advice to 'Worry about words' (1935) but adds that we should 'worry about them in the right way' (95-6).[26]

In reviewing the Lectures, Love observes, 'it is not difficult to detect a certain tension between some of the worries that are to be "swept away" and those that are deemed legitimate'. In particular, he observes that 'there is a point of view from which language death is no more than an extreme form of language change' (1998:208). Aitchison clearly subscribes to the mainstream linguistic belief that change does not make a language better or worse – the same belief that leads Pinker to assert that we should not worry about *disinterested* losing its 'correct' meaning (1994:402) – so her anxiety about decaying languages is not entirely consistent, particularly in view of her claim that 'we need to understand language ... not to try to control it' (95).

The categorical statement 'Language death is a very specific type of language change' is the opening sentence of an article that makes the incoherence of Aitchison's position particularly apparent (Dressler 1996:195). Decay consists of a series of changes in a language, of which Dressler lists a number of different kinds, reversible and irreversible; the latter leading eventually to the language disappearing. The question is how a user of the language in question would know whether these changes were symptoms of decay or benign progression. And if we subscribe to the notion that all varieties of language are capable of expressing whatever they need to, then the very idea of change from a 'vital' to a 'decaying' variety cannot be comprehended. Among the many changes Dressler notes are: large amounts of lexical borrowing from a dominant into a recessive language; loss of word-formation productivity; decay of subordinate clauses; the replacement of synthetic with analytic constructions; a shrinking of style repertoire; massive

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It is impossible to ignore the irony of one of the champions of the 'leave your language alone' doctrine quoting an arch-prescriptivist such as Herbert.

occurrence of free allophones; and, among symptoms of terminal decay (of the kind that occur when a minority language loses out to a majority one), he notes 'lack of puristic reactions':

> Imperfect speakers ... fail to notice such "corruptions", and older fluent speakers seem to have given up correcting them. This reflects a change in language attitude ... the recessive language is considered as worthless, not worthy of being properly transmitted. Such attitudinal change produces a relaxation of social, sociolinguistic and linguistic norms. (Dressler 1996:199)

However, linguists ridicule prescriptivists for complaining about 'corruption' and for imagining doomsday scenarios. It is tempting to ask some 'what if?' questions here. For example, what if this kind of prescriptivism, the kind that Aitchison and other anti-prescriptivists condemn, is precisely what might be needed to save a moribund language? What if the anti-prescriptive stance is largely a reflex of the Anglocentric nature of much of linguistics? In other words, what if anti-prescriptivism is essentially a luxury that linguists can afford to indulge in just because most of them happen to be speakers of English, a language that is certainly not endangered? This begins to put a different perspective on the idea that some worries are sensible and others are not.

A less facile attempt at finding a coherent way for linguists to address questions of value in language is made by Milroy and Milroy (1991;1999). Their motivation for attempting this is to enable linguists to contribute usefully to the ongoing debate in the UK over grammar-teaching in schools. They express concern about the public perception of the relation between linguistics and education:

> Advances made by linguists in descriptive grammar have not for the most part been understood outside linguistics. Indeed ... general linguists are sometimes actually blamed for what has often been seen as a decline in standards of English teaching. (Milroy and Milroy 1991:49)

In the third edition of their book they observe the same situation: that 'many people still interpret descriptive linguistics as inimical to standards of usage' (1999:9). (Page references in the rest of this section are to the 1999 edition of Milroy and Milroy unless otherwise stated.) As this book is concerned mainly with the situation in the UK, and since Aitchison's BBC Reith Lectures (broadcast 1996) were delivered in between the publication of the second and third editions, it might have been interesting to consider the effect of these lectures on public opinion. The Milroys comment only that 'linguistic correctness was the topic of the 1996 BBC Reith Lectures,

delivered by Jean Aitchison' (1999:9). The responses to her lectures that Aitchison quotes at the end of the published edition (1997) suggest that many may well have had their negative opinion of descriptive linguistics confirmed. She, however, brushes aside those who reacted negatively to her lectures as 'buzzing hornets' (1997:101).

Milroy and Milroy side with the descriptive linguists, though they do suggest quite mildly that these linguists might have erred:

> there has clearly been some failure of communication between linguistic scholars and the public ... . One reason for this is that 'mainstream' linguists (especially in the USA) has concentrated more on the abstract and formal properties of language than on language in its social context. (9)

Perhaps the problem is not so much one of 'failure of communication' as the more fundamental one of assuming that language *can* be split into these two components: of thinking there can be such a thing as language without a social context. The 'solution' the Milroys propose serves only to perpetuate the problem, because it promotes the view that the split is necessary. Because they want to assure the public that linguists are indeed concerned about standards, but at the same time want to uphold the anti-prescriptive tenets of their discipline, they offer a compromise solution: a division of prescriptivism into two types, one legitimate and one not. They explain this as follows:

> Outside the schoolroom, the standard ideology has been most openly promoted by writers in what we have called 'the complaint tradition'. This tradition can, however, be divided into two broad types. ...
>
> Type 1 complaints, which are implicitly legalistic and which are concerned with correctness, attack 'mis-use' of specific parts of the phonology, grammar, vocabulary of English (and in the case of written English 'errors' of spelling, punctuation, etc.). Type 2 complaints, which we may call 'moralistic', recommend clarity in writing and attack what appear to be abuses of language that may mislead and confuse the public. ... The correctness tradition (Type 1) is wholly dedicated to the maintenance of the norms of Standard English in preference to other varieties: sometimes writers in this tradition attempt to justify the usages they favour and condemn those they dislike by appeals to logic, etymology and so forth. Very often, however, they make no attempt whatever to explain why one usage is correct and another incorrect: they simply take it for granted that the proscribed form is *obviously* unacceptable and illegitimate; in short, they believe in a transcendental norm of correct English.
>
> Type 2 complaints do not devote themselves to stigmatising specific errors in grammar, phonology and so on. They accept the fact of standardisation in the

> written channel, and they are concerned with clarity, effectiveness, morality and honesty in the public use of the standard language. (30-31)

On first reading, this sounds reasonable and workable. We might, however, be concerned about the oddity of censuring Type 1 complainers for their dedication to 'maintaining the norms of Standard English' while endorsing the Type 2 complainers' 'acceptance of the fact of standardisation'. We might want to ask what exactly is meant by 'the fact of standardisation'. Does this imply a belief that the standard maintains itself? If not, and it has to be maintained by people (the agents elided by the nominalization *standardisation*), then these people must, by the Milroys' definition, be Type 1 complainers. A strange scenario then suggests itself, in which Type 1 complainers 'maintain the norms of Standard English' while Type 2 complainers, who disapprove of this activity, nevertheless consider it their job to attend to 'the public use' of this standard variety. One immediate problem with the Milroys' division is that it entrenches the separation between the linguist and the ordinary language user and interferes with their aim of proving to the general public that linguists are not responsible for a decline in standards of English teaching.

This is not, however, the only problem with the Milroys' division of language evaluation into two Types. Not only is this distinction theoretically incoherent; it also proves unworkable in application, as witnessed by the Milroys' equivocal comments, emphasizing at one moment that we can and should distinguish the two types:

> it is important that their different aims should be recognised (30); the two types of complaint can in general be sharply distinguished (31); Type 1 complaints must be sharply distinguished from the 'moralistic' complaints of Type 2. (33); Type 2 complaints, as we have pointed out, differ radically from these (34)

and at another recognizing the difficulty of doing so:

> these often overlap – sometimes in a confusing way – in the work of a single writer (30); Sometimes, however, it is difficult to classify a particular complaint as belonging to one of these two types. Complaints about careless usage of written *vocabulary* are very common, and they can often be said to contain characteristics of both types (34); similar concerns about effectiveness and clarity play some part in the views of educators in the teaching of literacy; however they can sometimes become confused with the concerns of Type 1 complaints on 'correctness' (39).

They attempt to make the Types easier to distinguish by suggesting a guideline: 'In so far as they oppose the tendency of language to change, they are of Type 1; in so far as they are concerned with careful and effective written usage, they are of Type 2' (34). To illustrate their distinction they refer to Amis (1980) and discuss this essay as an example of a 'mixed type' (34-5). Amis discusses two kinds of semantically erroneous use of words: the Wrong Word (outright malapropisms, such as *derangement* for *arrangement*) and the Wrong Sense (getting almost the right word, such as *perpetrated* for *perpetuated*). It is the latter he is more concerned about, because this is the kind that is perpetrated/perpetuated because of its closeness to the real thing. The Milroys appear to be suggesting that Amis ought to distinguish between words which are changing in the normal course of things (a Type 1 complaint and therefore bad), and words which are being misused and thus preventing effective communication (a Type 2 complaint and therefore allowable). They do not explain with any clarity how the two Types are to be distinguished in Amis's article, and Amis himself would have been surprised at their supposing he made a distinction; on the contrary, he does not at any point suggest that he thinks *any* kind of change is good. This is evident in various ironic asides clearly aimed at linguists, for example: 'I know, or at least am constantly being told, about languages having to change if they are not to die, though it seems to me often forgotten that death is a very important form of change' (1980:33). He is forthright in his condemnation of change:

> Various changes, not all of them educational, have seen to it that most of the men and women who use words in public don't care any more which words they are, apart from a feeble hankering after the vaguely stylish. The concept of finding the right word, which used to be a strong influence on that of finding a good word, is being lost. How such people keep awake while they write is beyond me. Anyway, their handiwork, or handi-idleness, is all about: growing imprecision as words without a synonym, like "disinterested", become synonyms of other, less exact words; quite commonly ambiguity or sheer nonsense; and everywhere awkwardnesses that force the reader to pause without profit, even if only for an instant. This is decline. (1980:32-3)

One more example shows how impossible it is to separate legalistic from moralistic complaints in Amis's essay. In the 80s, when this article was written, there was much fuss over what Amis calls 'floating *hopefully*', and the objection was that it was 'really' a verb modifier rather than a sentence modifier (in other words, that it would be correct to say 'We will travel hopefully', but not 'Hopefully, we will travel'). However, Amis sees it also as a moral offence:

> That is the unarguable objection to floating *hopefully*. The fellow can't say "I hope" because that would imply he has surrendered control of events ... he can't say "with luck" which is all he means; so he says "hopefully" and basks in a fraudulent glow of confidence. (1980:32)

It is unlikely that the thoughtful language user who objected to *hopefully* was clear about whether the problem was bad grammar or bad faith. In other words, the ordinary person who disliked this form would not have been able to classify his or her complaint as Type 1 or Type 2.

Pinker in effect applies the Milroys' distinction when he decides that the failure to distinguish *disinterested* from *uninterested* is evidence of an inevitable change in the *system* rather than an instance of careless and potentially confusing *use*. He does not, however, give a counter-example of a word being carelessly used rather than being simply a change in the system, or explain how he would make the distinction. It would be an interesting exercise for a linguist who believes in the possibility of this distinction to go through Amis's list of wrongly used words, classify these into 'careless use' and 'system change', and then set out the principles upon which these decisions were based. (For example, *flaunt* for *flout*? *gamut* for *gauntlet*? *emaciated* for *emasculated*? *refute* to mean 'deny'? *enervating* to mean 'energising'? *incarcerated* to mean 'incorporated'?) Pinker certainly does believe in the importance of clear expression: he says that 'The aspect of language use that is most worth changing is the clarity and style of written prose', and refers to writing as 'a difficult craft that must be mastered through practice, instruction, feedback, and ... exposure to good examples' (1994:401). However, an educationalist might be excused for thinking that Pinker's linguistics has nothing to contribute to this enterprise, and might even hinder it.

Perhaps the decision about whether a change in word meaning indicates an inevitable change in the system or careless usage that ought to be corrected depends not on principles that we can specify exactly, but on the value of that word for its user. Linguists, like all specialists, can become irritable when the careless usage occurs within their own discipline and might be less ready to suggest that it reflects inevitable system change:

> A grumpy aside à propos of this last word [*constraints*]: when will people learn to distinguish between *limitation* (simply the fact of a phenomenon having to exist or take place within boundaries), *restriction* (its being required to be

> limited), and *constraint* (the restriction being imposed by force)? (Hall 1981/2:112 n.1)[27]

Lyons also points out that linguists

> like all specialists, may... be guilty at times of misplaced terminological pedantry. In principle, however, the specialized vocabulary of linguistics, if it is kept under control and properly used, serves to clarify, rather than to mystify. It eliminates a good deal of ambiguity and possible misunderstanding. (Lyons 1981:46)

It is another manifestation of the split personality that the linguist should feel justified in disregarding misuse of lay vocabulary, putting it down to inevitable system change, yet insist on correctness in his own area of speciality.

Besides the difficulty of separating Type 1 and Type 2 *lexical* complaints, what about the problem of *grammatical* ones? We might take the example of one of Fowler's famous dislikes: 'It need hardly be said that writers with any sense of style do not, even if they allow themselves the fused participle, make so bad a use of the bad thing as is shown above to be possible'. Fowler condemns this construction in both legalistic (Type 1) and moralistic (Type 2) terms: it is bad grammar and our avoiding it 'retards the progress of corruption', and it is at the same time 'fatally tempting to the lazy writer' (Fowler 1988[1965]:216-7). What sense would it make to say that Fowler was within his rights to complain about what he believed was bad usage but wrong to worry about the system changing? And now that the fused participle is treated as acceptable (indeed, often goes unrecognized),[28] how can we tell whether this is due to bad usage or to the system's changing?

In any prescriptive writing it is easy to find examples of complaints in which the two Types are inseparably mixed, and it might be fair to say that prescriptive attitudes are more often a mixture than clearly one or the other. To be correct *is* to be morally right: the prescriptivist sees no distinction: 'There is, I believe, a morality of language: an obligation to preserve and nurture the

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27 This remark, it may be noted, comes from the author of *Leave Your Language Alone* (1950).

28 Halliday, however, notes that 'etiquette prescribes the possessive, which reflects the earlier status of these non-finite clauses as rankshifted; but the preferred form in current usage is the "oblique" case' (1994a:238) – thus recognizing both system shift and usage.

niceties, the fine distinctions, that have been handed down to us' (Simon1980:38). We find the same conflation in Burchfield's comment about the BBC newscast (quoted in 2.1.1) – 'what it said was both correctly said and was the truth'.

Of course, large sections of usage handbooks consist of simple statements of correct and incorrect usage, without the overt moral positioning. It would, however, be a rare handbook that did not give *some* moralistic encouragement to spur the reader to learn the rules. One of the handbooks on correct pronunciation referred to above (2.1.1) makes it clear in its preface that the rules are not arbitrary but underscored by ethical, intellectual and aesthetic imperatives:

> When it comes to pronunciation, there are two types of people: those who don't give the subject a second thought and those who do. This book is for those who do. ... In our home, words were nothing to trifle with. Language was the great, mysterious gift that distinguished the human being from the beast, and how you used words – and pronounced them – was a mark of character, intelligence and refinement. (Elster 1999:ix-x)

The Milroys recognize Orwell as an acceptable, even admirable, prescriptivist in the moralistic style, and certainly his most famous essay, *Politics and the English Language* (1946) concentrates on the kinds of fault that are clearly of the Milroys' Type 2: 'The English Language ... becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish' and 'the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts' (1946:128). But he also exhibited Type1 prescriptivist characteristics, and would probably have been puzzled at the distinction. Bolton remarks for instance that Orwell 'repeatedly proposed resistance to change (e.g.,"the degradation which is certainly happening to our language is a process which one cannot arrest by conscious action. But I would like to see the attempt made", *Collected Essays* 3.326')' (Bolton 1984:95).

The Milroys are in an awkward position. As linguists they ought to say 'We do not prescribe', and condemn those who do (for example, the people who write ignorant and offensive letters to the press about other people's language); but they also want to side with Orwell, for his manifest and commendable concern for the man in the street: 'Orwell's ultimate position is anti-authoritarian and in favour of the ordinary user of language' (39). They are obliged to be faithful to the linguistic credo which claims all languages are equal and that change is natural, not bad, so they must condemn prescriptive attitudes which claim 'the superiority of one language system over another' or which 'oppose the tendency to change'; but on the other hand, the same political

outlook which (along with a desire to be scientific), gave rise to this credo also requires them to demand 'morality and honesty' in the use of language. Besides this, their academic and pedagogic position requires them to ensure 'clarity and effectiveness' in their own work and in that of colleagues and students. In their move to make a clear distinction between the two types of prescriptivism they are trying to eat their cake and have it.[29] The ambivalence and confusion of their standpoint is evident in their comment that 'Other complaints about careless and inaccurate use of a standard literary language do not usually have the depth, breadth and incisiveness of Orwell's complaints' (39), which seems to suggest that Type 1 complaints pass muster provided the complainant is thorough enough.

Distinctions similar to the Milroys' have been made by other linguists wanting to legitimize the kinds of value judgement they approve of and outlaw others. Cameron, for example, points out that Robin Lakoff's attempt (1990) to legitimize her attack on sexist forms in English by distinguishing a legitimate category of 'spontaneous' change (good) from an illegitimate one consisting of 'deliberate manipulation' (bad) by 'powerful groups with vested interests' is 'a lame and unconvincing argument': she is trying 'to apply the "leave your language alone" principle *selectively*' (Cameron 1995:20). I would agree with Cameron that such attempts, along with those of Aitchison, Pinker and the Milroys, do not work: they simply involve the linguist in bad logic and disingenuousness. Cameron notes, despite her sympathy with Lakoff's views, that 'Lakoff's value judgements are not based on the spontaneous/deliberate criterion, but are covertly ideological' (1994:21).

4.4 Conclusion

It seems to me that the whole splitting enterprise is doomed to failure from the start, and that the dichotomies, contradictions, inconsistencies and incoherence I have described in this chapter spring from a basic flaw in the linguist's view of language: misapprehension of the ontological status of language *use* and language *system* (which is in turn a reflex of the *producer/product* misconception discussed in 3.3.1, above). The Milroys apparently consider system and use to

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'I notice that in current usage this has become "have your cake and eat it", which is a much blander form of wording, and also makes much less sense – the parataxis is linear: you eat your cake ... but then you still have it' (Halliday 1997:7).

be two separate entities, and suggest that the ordinary language user does not know this 'fact' about language:

> while Type 1 complaints appear to be attacks on detailed points of *usage*, they are actually making claims about the superiority of one language *system* over another (without usually being explicit about this, and often being apparently unaware of it). (1999:33)

But we might wonder whether it is not rather the Milroys who have lost touch with the facts. It is very easy for linguists to come to believe that their theoretical constructs reflect reality. Because the Milroys (and other linguists who implicitly accept the belief system of generative linguistics) give no consideration to the way their own language is involved in producing their theoretical presuppositions, they continue to think of the split as something real; hence their puzzlement (for example, in the Milroys' comment about the difficulties of classification, quoted above, 1999:34) when it turns out to be impossible to keep the 'halves' apart in practice. Besides this, the Milroys also believe (in common with Labov, who claims his choice of standard English is based on nothing but social convention) that language exists independently of its social context: 'usages that are favoured at one time may be stigmatised at another for reasons that have nothing to do with linguistic values, but which are purely social' (1999:33). The belief that *linguistic* and *social* values are separate leads to incoherent and unsupportable claims, for example, that somehow 'the public use of the standard language' differs from 'the maintenance of the norms of Standard English' (1999:31).

The belief that system and use are two different things is at odds with the way the ordinary language user understands language, and the linguist's mistake is to insist that the ordinary language user is mistaken and the linguist alone knows the 'facts'. Compounding this problem is the naivety of believing that enlightening the public about these 'facts' of language will make them overlook its social power. As Love puts it, in reference to Aitchison's lectures, 'It is highly unlikely that Aitchison's 'tangled web of worries' about language shows how little people know about it ... or that knowing more about it would dissolve them' (1998:208). The assumption that *system* and *use* are separable is a reflex of the dichotomizing approach of formal linguistics (of the *langue/parole* dichotomy, if we see system as a social entity, or of the *competence/ performance* one, if we see system as a psychological entity), and the generative linguist's inability to say anything useful to the ordinary language user is the result of trying to apply these

theoretical idealizations to real-world problems. As Roy Harris observes, 'linguistics emerges as a "science" in which the scientists have to ignore their own theoretical principles in order to be able to practise'(1990:36-38).

The following chapter takes a step back to examine the assumptions that have led to the misfit between linguistic theory and social practice. I look at some ways of thinking about what kind of 'science' linguistics might be, which depend on what kind of 'object' we think language is, and in 5.4 I discuss Halliday's view, which recognizes the role of value in language and metalanguage. In Chapter Six I examine the way the linguist's own language reifies the linguist's meanings and values and in Chapters Seven and Eight I discuss the way Halliday re-unites many of the elements orthodox theory separates (in particular *system* and *use*, *language* and *society*) and in so doing produces a coherent theory that renews contact with the ordinary language user's understanding of value and evaluation in language.