



## The Heart of the Matter

### Lava Lamps and Language

One of the most frustrating things for any linguist is a virtually universal misimpression that the world is full of people neglecting "proper," "logical" speech for "lazy speech" full of "errors," considered slovenly lapses in the vein of bad posture or inattentive grooming. As we will see throughout this book, this sentiment takes a great number of forms—the feeling that "dialects" are detours from an ideal, that Caribbean creole languages are bastardizations of European languages, that it is "wrong" to say "Billy and me went to the store" or "Tell the student that they can come in."

Any linguist works to convince people of the fallacy behind such views, based on one of the central findings of modern linguistics, that human speech is always systematic, whether casual or formal. However, dinner party guests, café lunch dates, and pals in living room bull sessions are rarely convinced by this characterization, confidently maintaining that dialects are just sloppy versions of "languages," and that the *dos* and *don'ts* of "grammar" they were taught in the schoolroom are vital to clarity and logic. Many people suspect that linguists are putting a dewy-eyed egalitarianism over scientific rigor.

Frankly, if I were not a linguist, I would feel the same way. In our daily lives, standard English is enshrined in tidy print and spoken by the best and brightest, while other dialects are used mostly orally and have no public status beyond comedy and "quaintness." Given this everyday experience, it is natural for the layperson to suspect that the



emperor has no clothes when linguists say that all dialects are "legitimate." The truth only becomes apparent with sustained examination of various dialects, and most of us, after all, have a great deal else to do. Specifically, understanding the grounds for the linguist's dismissal of the notion of "sloppy speech" requires a crash course in something that at first glance may seem rather tangential to the issue: how languages change. I will show here what has led linguists to consider all fluent human speech varieties to be equal, demonstrating that the basis of this assertion is empirical, not sentimental.

### CLOCKS VERSUS LAVA LAMPS: THE ETERNAL MUTABILITY OF HUMAN SPEECH

Underlying the truth about dialects and casual speech is a fundamental fact about human language, with which we must make a deep and lasting peace:

*Language is always changing.*

This is not as obvious as it may at first appear. Of course, we all know and love the fact that slang terms and expressions come and go all the time. What was "the bee's knees" in the 1920s was "swell" in the 1930s, "keen" in the 1950s, "groovy" in the 1960s, "neat" in the 1970s, "wicked" for a while in the 1980s, and today is "rad" or is said to "rock."

It is less easy to perceive, however, that language is also always changing in a much deeper and more significant sense than mere colorful words and idioms. Sounds are always wearing off, other sounds are always evolving into different ones; endings are constantly wearing off, new endings are constantly developing; word meanings drift; and the order of words changes. These things happen so slowly that they are usually barely perceptible within a human lifetime. However, the changes are so relentless and so profound that there is no society in the world in which people could converse with their ancestors from more than about a thousand years back. In this amount of time, and usually much less, any language develops into a new one.

If we are not aware of this on a day-to-day level, we know it in a historical sense. For example, here is a sample of the Lord's Prayer in Old English, as it would have been spoken in about A.D. 1000:

Fæder ure, thu̅ the eart on heofonum  
father our you that are in heaven,

Si̅ thin naman geha̅lgod  
be your name blessed

Ure gedæghwænlican hlāf syle us tō dæg  
our daily bread give us to day

Although we can make out some of the words here, such as *fæder* for father, clearly this language is opaque to us, to the point that word-for-word translation is necessary for us to make it out. Today, students of Old English must study it as a foreign language, and mastering it is as difficult as mastering German (a close relative). Word order is different from what we are used to ("father our" instead of "our father," "our daily bread give us" instead of "give us our daily bread," etc.). For every word, like *fæder*, that we can make out, there are others completely unknown to us today, such as *syle* for *give*. Other words' meanings have changed. *Hlāf* meant *bread* at the time, but today has been restricted to the meaning of *loaf*. The word *bread* did exist in Old English, but meant any piece of food; only gradually did it develop its modern meaning, replacing *hlāf*. Even the sound system is vastly different from ours. We no longer have words like *hlaf* in which *h* precedes *l*, and in Old English, there was no such thing as a word beginning with *v*. The line above some of the vowels meant that the vowel was a long one rather than short: *Hlāf* would have been pronounced "haahf." This distinction seems trivial to us, but it was crucial in Old English: Sometimes, the only difference between two words was the length of the vowel. *Fal* was "foul," while *ful* was "full."

Yet this is "English," as it was spoken in A.D. 1000. The English I am writing in would not exist for several centuries. The reason we speak the English we speak today is due to nothing other than the ceaseless change that all languages undergo over time. Of course, the change is gradual. For example, here is Middle English as it was spoken in about 1300:

Fader oure that is i heuen, blessid be thi name. Oure ilk day bred gif us to day.

By this point we are closer to the English we know; no word-for-word translation is needed here (*ilk* means "every"; *ilk day bred* means "every



day bread," i.e., daily bread). However, sounds are still different, and the word order is still unusual to our eye. This is roughly the language of Chaucer, and only with great difficulty could we converse with him. We'd get a word here, a phrase there, but it would generally sound like a kaleidoscopic English in a bizarre accent, and we would at first wonder whether we had had a small stroke, or perhaps Chaucer had slipped something into our drink. There is still a way to go before the modern version. We usually encounter the Lord's Prayer in its archaic rendering, with "who art" and "give us today our," but in English as spoken today, it is

Our Father, who is in heaven, blessed be your name. Give us our daily bread today.

It is important to realize that this kind of change was not something unusual, connected to something like the rise of England as a world power or the many peoples the English came into contact with as a result. This kind of change has happened to every single one of the 5,000-plus languages on earth. Two thousand years ago, there was no such thing as the French language. It was still Latin. Latin only developed into French (and Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and other languages) later, in the exact same way as Old English developed into Modern English. Chinese people today would find Ancient Chinese as baffling to the ear as we would find Old English. A Navajo would need a crossmillennial translator to converse with a Navajo from A.D. 1000; a modern Samoan would be equally stumped by Samoan of A.D. 1000. The producers of the film *Dracula* (1993) prided themselves on their accuracy in having the actors in scenes of ancient Transylvania speak Romanian rather than English. In fact, they made an unintentional blunder, because what the characters would have spoken is *Old* Romanian, a different language to modern Romanian ears.

What is especially crucial for us, however, is that such change is still going on every day in all languages. If we could transport ourselves in a time machine to America of the year 4000, our first problem would not be the quaint cultural misunderstandings so entertaining in movies like Woody Allen's *Sleeper*, but the fact that we wouldn't understand a word anyone was saying, even though they would consider themselves to be speaking "English." Moreover, new slang and technical terms would be the least of our worries—more to the point, the very sounds,

structure, and word meanings of English would have changed so much that we would have to learn it as a new tongue.

Now, seen as history, laid out nice and tidy on a page, language change looks harmless enough. However, an eternal paradox is that we are often much less comfortable with language change as it occurs in our own lives. Why this discomfort? Because while language change looks smooth and neat when we see it in old texts over time, it is a much messier process here on the ground.

This is because when a feature of a language begins to change, such as a sound, a sentence structure, or a word meaning, the changed version does not immediately replace the original feature. Instead, for a long time the two versions of the feature coexist. An example is the form *singing* and its newer offspring, *singin'*.

Where our discomfort with language change comes in is that in comparison to the original form, the new version is almost always thought of as "wrong" or "sloppy," and the older one as "correct"—humans are creatures of habit. Thus we think of *singin'* as a mark of lazy speech, a Budweiser sort of thing. Most importantly, within our lives, we think of such usage as "static," as fleeting misuses of an otherwise stalwart "language." Our parents correct us about them, and schoolteachers warn us against them. There is always the implication that such things are peccadillos that would not occur in an ideal world, and in any case, ultimately, they leave the language intact.

Yet no matter what our parents tell us, no matter how much our schoolteachers correct us, such things have a way of hanging on. After all, in unguarded moments our parents say these very things, as do our schoolteachers after hours. This is because, in the eyes of God, *singin'* is not "sloppy." For one thing, it does not hinder communication: When someone says "We were *singin'*," we are not misled to imagine them poaching an egg or repairing a carburetor. More to the point, *singin'* is the inevitable descendant of a word like *singing* as it is used over time, as eternal as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly—transformation of this kind occurs in every language in the world and always has. *Singin'* is no more sloppy or avoidable than the coming of spring.

Thus *singin'* holds on. In fact, over time the new, sloppy version of the feature slowly crowds out the old one. More and more speakers use only the new form instead of the old and the new one. After a long



enough period, no one uses the old form at all anymore, so that there is no supposedly "correct" form to compare the sloppy one too. At this point, what was once a sloppy feature is now thought of as the correct one.

Indeed, the appearance of what we think of as sloppy or "incorrect" features of language is exactly how language changes. There is no other, tidier way that it happens. The evolution from Old English to Middle English to Modern English took place in just this way, through the gradual triumph of one sloppy alternative after another. In other words, the things that we now see as incorrect are nothing more and nothing less than ordinary signs of the constant change that any language undergoes.

Some readers may find it hard to swallow that the way language changes is via kitchen-sink colloquialisms like *singin'* versus *singing*, or *Who did you see?* rather than *Whom did you see?* We are accustomed to thinking of this lowly sounding language as beneath us, not as signs of progress, just as many were uncomfortable when Darwin told us that humans are descended from apes. But in language as in evolution, this is the way it is whether we like it or not!

We can see this better by looking at it from a little closer up, and comparing what led to the development of Modern English with things going on under our very noses.

For example, today, we view the use of *dose* for *those* as incorrect or lazy. But in Old English, *forgite* was *forgif*, pronounced "forgif." Whether or not mothers and teachers scolded children for being "lazy" and saying "forgive" instead of "forgif," we say "forgive" today and think nothing of it. We certainly wouldn't give much time to someone who suggested that we go back to saying "forgif." *Dem, dese, and doze* are the "forgives" of today.

We can compare *singing* versus *singin'* with another example. In earlier English, the *-ed* ending was always pronounced "id," such that *called* was pronounced "cawl-id" rather than "cawld," as we now pronounce it. Today, this pronunciation is restricted to a few archaic frozen phrases like *blessed be thy name*. As late as the 1700s, however, both forms were still used, with the older "id" pronunciation seen as correct and the "d" pronunciation as the sloppy one. None other than Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was typical of his era in sensing the "d" pronunciation as a sign of English going to Hell in a handbasket,

and in 1712 condemned the pronunciation of *rebuked* as "rebuk'd" as an example of the newfangled "barbarous custom of abbreviating words"! Of course, to us today, this evokes a giggle.

Another example is *often*, which many people sense "should" be pronounced "off-tin," as it is written, and see the frequent pronunciation, "off-in," as "slumming" a bit. However, across the world, languages are constantly shedding sounds in order to ease the pronunciation of words. As we saw in the Old English version of the Lord's Prayer, *name* was *nanna* in A.D. 1000. Gradually, the final *a* eroded to the indistinct sound of *a* in *about*, which is approximately the way it would have been pronounced in the time of Chaucer. Even by Chaucer's time, however, it was often—or, should we say, often—not pronounced any more. The shedding of the awkward *t* in *often* is no different from the shedding of *a* in *nanna*, and thus we should feel no more compunction to say "off-tin" than we do to say "So, little girl, what's your nanna?"

Another example. We are often told that to say *Who did you see?* is "incorrect," and that the "proper" form is *Whom did you see?*, *whom* being used when the person in question is an object rather than a subject. People who insist on this usage, however, are resisting the eternal engine of change operating in any language, like jabbing a stick between the spokes of a spinning bicycle wheel.

Those of us who have taken Latin recall that, unlike English, Latin requires a different ending on a noun according to whether it was used in the nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, etc. Thus, "the boy sees" was *puer videt*, but "Peter sees the boy" was *Petrus videt puerum*; "the boy's book" was *liber pueri* (literally, "the book of the boy"); "Peter gives the book to the boy" was *Petrus dat librum puero*.

Old English was one of these types of languages, and therefore words had different endings according to whether they were subjects, objects, etc. *Whom* was not the isolated, queer little exception it is today, but was part of a general pattern that operated throughout the language: "man" alone was *guma*, but if you saw a man, then you saw a *guman*—*guman* was the accusative form just as *puerum* was the accusative form of "boy" in Latin.

Over time, English has shed these complex endings, just as all languages with such endings shed them. Latin did too, and therefore we do not have to be bothered with learning such things when we learn modern "Latins," such as French or Spanish. As we saw, however,



language change is not tidy down here on the scene. In the long view, English is at the tail end of a gradual shedding of its sets of endings, which will eventually include dropping the *-m* from *whom*, so that *who* can be used as both subject and object just like *boy*, *man*, and *cow* are used in the same form no matter how they are used. In our brief, daily lives, however, *whom* has not completely disappeared yet—as always, the old and the new form are coexisting for a time. However, the change from *Whom did you see* to *Who did you see* is as unstoppable as the flow of the Nile. In a thousand years, *whom* will quite likely be unheard of except by specialists in what will by then be called “Middle” English, our English of today.

When we take a bird’s-eye view of the situation and recall that Old English became Middle English became Modern English, our feelings about *whom* are almost funny—if *whom* is so wonderful, then why don’t we say that the *harp* is beautiful, but that it’s difficult to play the *harp-an*, as an Old English speaker would have put it? Verbs had their own elaborate sets of endings in Old English too. The next time someone insists that you talk like a ninth-century Saxon and say “Whom did you see?”, make sure they are willing to put their money where their mouth is and say not “I love you” but “I luff-*ie* you” to their mate (and to not complain to you when their mate “luff-*ath*” them no more as a result).

Of course, part of why it looks so odd to us that language change would take place via things like *singin’* and *Who did you see* is that, in itself, the logical conclusion of this is frightening to contemplate. Indeed, if *all* language change consisted of was shedding sounds and endings, then eventually all human communication would be reduced to a desperate, open-mouthed vocal drool. Luckily, at the same time as languages shed sounds and endings, they are always developing new ones. As with the “erosions,” however, we tend to treat these “renewals” as aberrations, even though the innocent development of Old English into Modern English took place through the same kinds of operations.

For example, the sound written as *a* in *name* was pronounced like the *a* in *father* in the Old English *nama* (“nah-mah”). Today, however, the vowel in *name* is nothing like the *a* we write. It is really two sounds: “eh” plus “ee”—“neh-*ee*m.” This is called a *diphthong*, a term from the Greek for “two sounds,” *di* + *phthong*. Thus two sounds developed out of what was originally one. This happens all the time: Today, many Philadelphians pronounce *bad* not with a single vowel sound, but rather

like “bay-uhd”—again, two vowel sounds where there used to be one. But although we see *nama* to *name* as simply the noble passage of history, we see “bay-uhd” as a quaint localism, an odd habit Philadelphians have fallen into perhaps because of the overcrowding of urban living or having to shout over traffic. In fact, however, we can be quite sure that at one time, when the “proper” pronunciation of *name* was roughly “nah-muh,” pronouncing it as “neigh-m” sounded just as quaint.

Similarly, just as languages both shed and grow sounds, they shed endings like the *-m* of *whom* and grow new ones. What are endings in a language today were separate words at an earlier stage in the language. For example, the ending *-ly* comes from the word *like*: *sweetly*, for example, was “*sweþ-like*” (*sweþ-like*) in Old English. Over time, the erosion of sounds that we have seen turned *like*, when used at the end of words in this way, into *-ly*, obscuring the relationship between the two and leaving the ending we know and love. We can see a stage when the source of *-ly* in *like* was more apparent in the word for *daily* in the Old English Lord’s Prayer, *ge-dæglicum-lic-an*, “day-like” (the final *-an* is another one of those peskicky endings that English has shed in a process of which the slow death of *whom* is a symptom). In colloquial English, this is happening again, in expressions like “Do it real slow-like”—yet this we see as “improper” English!

While this erosion and renewal of sounds and endings is constantly happening, the meaning of words is also constantly changing in any language. In these cases, we are dealing neither with erosion nor renewal so much as simply drift. For example, Modern English uses the word *to* with verbs in a neutral form called the infinitive, used as in *He began to sing*. In Old English, however, the ancestor of the word *to* was not used in this way. An infinitive verb was simply one word, with an ending *-an*: *He began to sing* was *He ongon singan*. *To* only came to be used with infinitives in Middle English, as endings like *-an* were shed. If we think about it, however, this is a rather odd usage of *to*—how is the *to* in *He began to sing* “*to*” anything? Perhaps we can wrap our heads around it if we work at it—maybe to begin something we need to go toward it on some level—but clearly this is a lot more abstract and vague than the way we use *to* in *He went to the store*.

But changes like this are ordinary—words are constantly being taken into constructions like this in which their meanings are altered virtually beyond recognition. Today, younger Americans are using the



word *all* in sentences like "And he was all 'You took my pen' and I was all 'No, I didn't.'" Adults see this as a bizarre "slang," and it is sometimes cited in newspaper complaints about how "English is going to the dogs." Indeed, the exact meaning of *all* as used in this construction has become pretty abstract. But *to in to sing* sounded just as irregular to a few generations of English speakers centuries ago—yet imagine reading a six-hundred-year-old newspaper column (if there were such a thing) in which someone complains about how the whippersnappers are saying "I want to sing!"

Pundits of yore actually left behind such complaints. Until the 1600s, *you* was only used to address two or more people, and *thou* was used for one person (*thou shalt not*). Gradually, *you* came to be used for both one or several people and *thou* disappeared. Nothing could be more natural to us than a sentence like *Tim, you should go tomorrow*, but as with all language changes, there was a time when both forms were used, and the use of *you* with one person was thought of as the "messy" and "illogical" form because of *you's* original use as a plural, not singular, form. Here is one scholar ranting about English falling apart:

Is he not a Novice and unmannerly, and an Ideot and a Fool, that speaks *You to one*, which is not to be spoken to a *Singular*, but to *many*? O Vulgar Professors and Teachers, that speak *Plural*, when they should *Singular*. ... Come you Priests and Professors, have you not learnt your *Accidence*?

Of course, here on the other side of this change, this man is but a cartoon; it is he who seems the unmannerly "ideot" and fool. What is hard for us to realize, however, is that all language change is as inevitable and harmless as the change from *thou* to *you*.

What all of this means is simply that our working conception of a language as a set, established system, which we only vary out of a sort of shaggy, six-pack laziness, is simply an artifact of the perspective from the vantage point of our brief lifespans. In reality, language is indeed a system, but it is a system that is at all times on its way to changing into a different one. What we perceive as "departures from the norm" are nothing more or less than what language change looks like from the point of view of a single lifetime.

In our own heads, and especially when captured in print, languages unavoidably look etched in stone, eternal, authoritative. In reality, a printed passage in a language is like a Polaroid snapshot of a

person, a fleeting image of an organism always in transformation. The snapshot freezes this image in a scrapbook, but the person stopped looking precisely like the image as soon as the flash was over and looks less and less like the image as time goes on. Languages are the same.

Illiterate societies actually have less trouble with language change than we do. Having written language—those snapshots—is what throws us. Because speaking is primarily an effortless, subconsciously controlled activity, we cannot resist the tendencies of change on the spoken level—almost everybody says *singin'* instead of *singing* at least sometimes, and anyone who insists on saying *whom* all the time probably doesn't date much. Writing, however, is an artificial, conscious activity, and thus it is easy to resist language change in writing. We are taught to do just this, and therefore most written language is an artificial representation, omitting the signs of change which the real language, the spoken one, is full of. Indeed, writing slows language change down somewhat even on the spoken level, as writing reinforces our sense of "language" as a disembodied blueprint to be followed or flouted. English changed much more from A.D. 1000 to 1400, before the invention of printing, than it has since. Even so, however, even writing can only slow down the operations of change, not stop them. Dictionary editors and grammarians are always giving in to constructions resisted by their predecessors. No matter what the authority of the written form, or how tenaciously it holds on to the past, or how absurd the gulf between the written and the spoken form becomes, the spoken form always, always keeps on changing—and ultimately drags the written form reluctantly with it.

What we must realize, however, is that during these changes, because renewal always complements erosion, all languages are eternally self-sustaining, just as while our present mountains are slowly eroding, new ones are gradually being thrown up by the movement of geological plates. Thus at any given time, a language is coherent and complex, suitable for the expression of all human needs, thoughts, and emotions. Just as linguists have encountered no languages that do not change, they have also not encountered any languages whose changes compromised their basic coherency and complexity. We have encountered no society hampered by a dialect that was slowly simply wearing out like an old car. Anthropologists report no society in which communication is impossible in the dark because the local dialect has become



so mush-mouthed and senseless that it can only be spoken with help from hand gestures. In other words, there is no such thing as a language "going to the dogs"—never in the history of the world has there existed a language that has reached, or even gotten anywhere near, said dogs. We can see this in the transition from Old English to Middle English to Modern English.

*Old*

Fæder ure, thū the eart on heofonum,  
sī thīn nama gehālgod. Urne  
gedæghwāmlican hlāf syle us to dæg

*Middle*

Fader oure that is i heuven, blessid be thi name. Oure ilk day bred gif us to day.

*Modern*

Our Father, who is in heaven, blessed be your name. Give us our daily bread today.

All three of these languages were rich, beautiful systems. There are no dogs to be seen. Middle English, the language of Chaucer, does not give the impression of being a "bastardization" of Old English or an example of "Old English in decay." It was simply a new English of its own, the product of the gradual transformation of Old English, a transformation barely perceptible to Old English speakers themselves but visible to us by looking at texts over time. Similarly, Modern English, the language of Jane Austen, is surely not "bad" Middle English, but a new English in its own right. In other words, the progression from Old to Middle to Modern English shows us that contrary to the impression so easy to harbor within our own lives:

*Language change is not decay.*

What it comes down to is that we have an analogy problem. We tend to think of language as being like a clock mechanism—a conglomeration of parts intended to function unchangingly over the ages. As the system operates, there is natural tendency toward erosion of the parts, which must be counteracted at all times lest the system break down. Indeed, the only alterations possible are to perhaps exchange a copper gear for an identical one made of nickel, or to replace a belt with a filament—superficial changes like slang in language.

In fact, however, the most useful analogy to keep in mind is that a language is like a lava lamp. The "lava" slowly swirls and clumps and

rises and falls in its fluid in an eternal, mesmerizing flow. Although constantly changing, in no sense is the clump of lava decaying—if one piece is beginning to drip or split into strands, we can be sure that a few inches away, other pieces are joining together. At any given point, we do not see the present configuration of the lava clump as somehow "better" than the one thirty seconds ago—the joy is in the infinite variations that the clump can take while at all times remaining consistent in its expressive motility.

### DIFFERENT SPINS OF THE WHEEL: WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES?

With this new conception of a language as an ever-changing organism, we are prepared to move one step closer to understanding what dialects are. What I have shown you so far is the development of one language, Old English, into another one, Modern English. In fact, however, often a language will develop not into just one other language but into several.

In order to understand this, we need to refine our new conception of language a bit. An important thing to realize about the way language changes is that although there are definite tendencies, such as erosion, renewal, and drift, there is no predicting which one of these tendencies will operate on which part of a language at a given time. Furthermore, each type of tendency can manifest itself in any one of several alternate ways on any given part of a language. Therefore, we can never predict exactly what form a language will take in the future. If we could roll back the tape of history and let Old English change again, for example, we can be sure that the result would have been an English quite different from ours. In the same way, we know that the clump of lava in the lamp breaks apart, rejoins, and oozes in certain broadly similar patterns, but we can't predict exactly what pattern the clump will form in five minutes, any more than can we can predict which side of our hand a drop of water will roll down.

For example, the *th* sound is always ripe for change in a language. It is a fairly rare sound worldwide—if you think about it, there is no *th* in any second language you are likely to have learned, unless you were by some chance taught Castilian Spanish (but even Latin American Spanish lacks it). The reason it is rare is because it is a rather tricky sound to



make, much like the delightful clicks in some South African languages, like the one the African spoke in the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. This is the reason that foreigners have a particularly hard time with it—think of French people saying “sings” instead of “things.” If sounds like this evolve in a language, they tend to change into easier ones before very long. What is important is that there are various directions in which it can change. *Thing* becomes *ting* in many varieties of English—think of Moe or Police Chief Wiggum on *The Simpsons*, “dose things over dere.” In Cockney English, however, it is *finjs* (*Fings Ain’t Wot They Used to Be*). The reason Latin American Spanish lacks the Castilian *th* is because in this variety *th* became not *t*, but the sound *s*. *Hacer* “to make” is pronounced “ah-thair” in Castilian Spanish but “ah-sair” in Latin America, for example. All three of these sounds, *t*, *f*, and *s*, make intuitive sense as “substitutes” for *th* if we roll them around in our mouths—think of babies saying “teef” instead of “teeth.” However, we could never predict which choice a language will make in transforming *th*—it’s a matter of chance.

Another example is the preservation of the *-s* ending in the third person singular (*she sings*), an odd, serendipitous choice as language change goes. If English could develop again, either there would be no endings on verbs in the present tense at all by now, or a single one would be preserved on some other verb form, such as the first person singular, leaving *I lov-ie, you love, he love, we love, you love, they love*.

The chance factor becomes important in language change when, for some reason, people speaking the language split into two groups. Often this has happened when one subgroup has split off to migrate elsewhere. In situations like these, the language will continue changing among both groups—because language always changes—but because each change has many directions to choose from (like *th*), the language will develop different new forms in one group and in the other. Furthermore, each group may have contact with speakers of other languages, making the two strands even more different as time goes by. After a while, the two strands of the language will have gotten so far apart that speakers of one strand will no longer understand speakers of the other. Each will have to learn the other speaker’s strand as a foreign language. In other words, the result is two new languages where once there was one. Some variation on this process is how every language on earth has arisen.

As often as not, a language actually splits into more than just two branches. For example, under the Roman Empire, Latin was spread to so many regions across Europe that many subgroups used the language for centuries without having contact with one another. As a result, Latin took a different direction in each place. The outcome of this is the many Romance languages of today, of which there are five main members: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian (there are others spoken by fewer people, such as Catalan of Spain and the famous “fourth” Swiss language, Romansch). Each one of these languages is the result of a “roll of the dice” in each region. We can imagine setting up five lava lamps, each with an identically shaped clump of lava set in the same initial position, and turning them on at the same time. Five minutes later, each clump would have assumed a unique pattern, and never would any two assume an identical pattern.

For example, we have seen that languages constantly erode sounds over time. What we did not see is that we can never predict exactly what the result of a given erosion is going to be. For example, in Latin, *habere* “to have” was pronounced “ha-beh-ray.” Each Romance language has eroded this word somewhat, but each in its own, unpredictable way. Spanish today has *haber*. Although the spelling includes an *h*, this hasn’t been pronounced for centuries. Spanish has eroded the initial *h* (just as many British dialects do, as we see in Eliza Doolittle’s struggle with “hurricanes hardly happen”) and the final *e* of *habere* and kept the rest, turning “ha-beh-ray” into “ah-bear.” But in Italian, the wind blew in a different direction, creating *avere*, “ah-veh-ray.” It let the *h* go too, but kept the final *e*, instead “softening” the *b* to a *v* (just as English speakers softened the *f* at the end of *forgy* into a *v*).

Similarly, each branch of a language will create new endings according to its own dictates. In Italian, “I will love” is *amerò*. This began as two words in Latin, *amare* “to love” and *habeo* “I have.” When Latin speakers joined the words for “I have” and “to love” like this, while to us it would mean “I must love,” in Latin *amare habeo* was a way of saying “I am going to love.” Over time, the two words were used together like this so often that they ran together (just as “Did you eat?” in spoken English can become “jeet?”). Today, the *-ò* at the end of *amerò* in Italian is the only remnant of what was once the whole word *habeo*. On the other side of Europe, however, Romanian has inherited the *amare habeo* expression too, but keeps it as separate words, as they were in



Latin. However, instead of turning *habeo* into an ending, it has turned its definite article into one, sticking it onto the noun. Thus where Spanish has *el hombre for the man*, Romanian has *omul*, where *-ul* has the same Latin source as Spanish *el*. No one could have predicted that Italian would deprive *habeo* of its independent wordhood, while Romanian would choose to do this to *ul*—it was just the luck of the draw.

Nor is it predictable how the meanings and uses of words will drift in one branch of a language as opposed to another. The word *parabolare* in Latin was a secondary word for "to speak," *loquere* being the main one. In French, it was *parabolare* that became the source for the basic word for "to speak," *parler*. But in Spanish, it was a different Latin verb that came to mean "to speak"; *fabulare*, "to chat," became *hablar* (*Aquí se habla español*), more recognizable in the Portuguese *falar*. In Spanish, *parabolare* developed into the obscure word *parlar*, meaning "to chatter."

Finally, each branch of Latin was affected by contact with different languages. Because Arabic-speaking Moors occupied Spain for eight centuries, Spanish incorporated a number of words like *alcalde* "mayor" and *alcohol* from Arabic. On the other side of Europe, however, the reason that the definite article *ul* wound up at the end of the noun in Romanian instead of at the beginning is because Romania is a region that has been shared by a great many different language groups over the ages. Throughout history, Romanian speakers were so often bilingual in Romanian and some other language that placed its definite article after the noun that Romanian speakers began using that word order even in their own language.

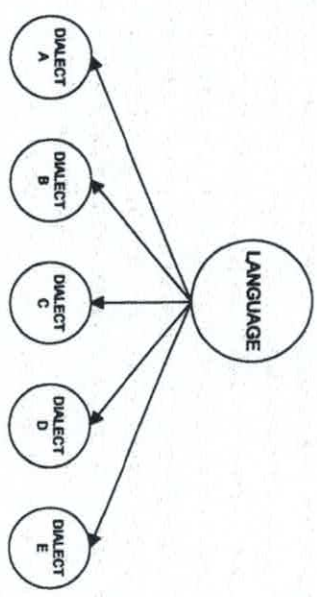
Thus languages often change not simply into one new language, but into several. Yet just as Modern English is not a "degraded" form of Old English, none of the multiple branches of a language are degradations of the original source: All maintain coherency and complexity. We have no trouble thinking of the Romance languages as legitimate, complex tongues in their own right, not "sloppy Latin." Surely Gabriel García Márquez does not abuse Latin in writing his marvelous novels. In writing the libretto to *Don Giovanni*, Lorenzo da Ponte did not fill the characters' mouths with "Latin of the streets." Few critics would take Baudelaire to task for the "lazy Latin" of his poetry. Yet all of these languages emerged via the very processes that strike us as symptomatic of "bad grammar" in our own lifetimes. Indeed, for a long time in each

place where a Romance language is now spoken, Latin and the emerging new language coexisted, with the new language—the same one revered today as French, Spanish, Italian, etc.—thought of as a slovenly "peasant" speech, barely suitable for writing. Our conviction that people using casual speech are somehow "asleep at the switch" results simply from our using the wrong analogy, thinking of a language as clockworks rather than a lava lamp. No language has ever been recorded as grinding itself down to dust. Like lava lamps, languages simply pass from one beautiful stage to another.

### HOW TO STOP WORRYING AND LEARN TO LOVE DIALECTS: HOW DIALECTS ARISE

Now, in the Romance language situation, five branches of Latin evolved so far from one another that they became separate languages. As we saw, however, this change is an incremental process, and thus is a matter of degree. In many cases, a language has branched off into several offshoots, but the branches have not developed along their own paths to such a degree that they become separate languages. This happens when the various groups are contained within a small enough space that they continue to have contact with one another, in trade, intermarriage, and in sharing spaces. In situations like this, basic separation will ensure that many changes will take different directions in each branch. Meanwhile, however, an equal number of changes will take the same route in most or all of the branches. This is because the speakers of the branches are exposed to each other's speech often enough that the needs of comprehension will drive them to follow one another's changes as often as not. This is not, of course, a conscious process, but put broadly, people in intimate enough contact to be a community will all basically speak the same way; people with no contact will eventually speak different languages, but people with some contact will speak distinct varieties of a single language. Each variety is certainly different, but speakers of all branches can still understand each other or at least manage to with some adjustment, and all consider themselves to be speaking essentially the same language. (This is represented in the following figure.)





In cases like this, the varieties are called *dialects* of the language in question.

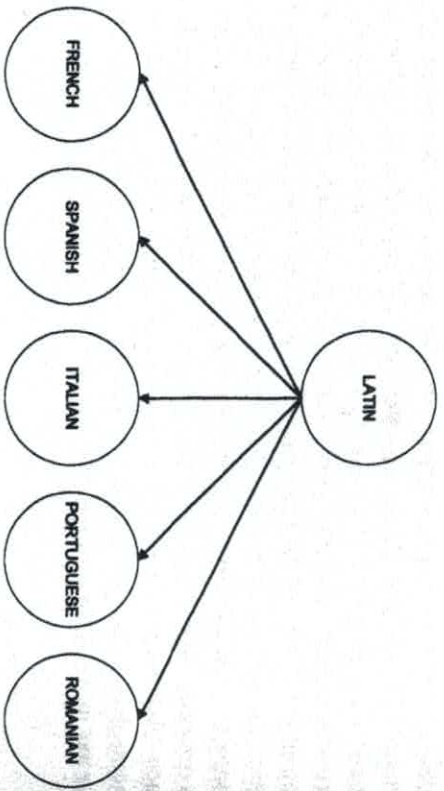
In contrast, the figure below shows the wider separations between the Romance languages.

Now consider the various dialects of British English, such as the following:

Standard: The government has today decreed that all British beef is safe for consumption.

Lancashire: Ween meet neaw ta'en a hawse steyler at wur mayin' off with'tt.

We have just now taken a horse stealer who was making off with it.



Cornwall: Aw bain't gwine for tell ee.

He isn't going to tell you.

Scots: Efter he had gane thru the haill o it, a fell fairmin brak out i yon laund.

After he had gone through all of it, a great famine broke out in the land.

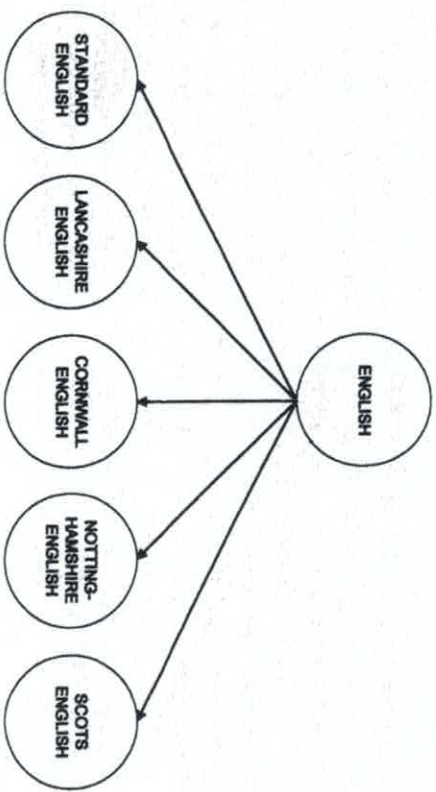
Nottinghamshire: Tha mun come one naight ter th' cottage, afore tha goos; sholl ter?

You must come one night to the cottage before you go, will you?

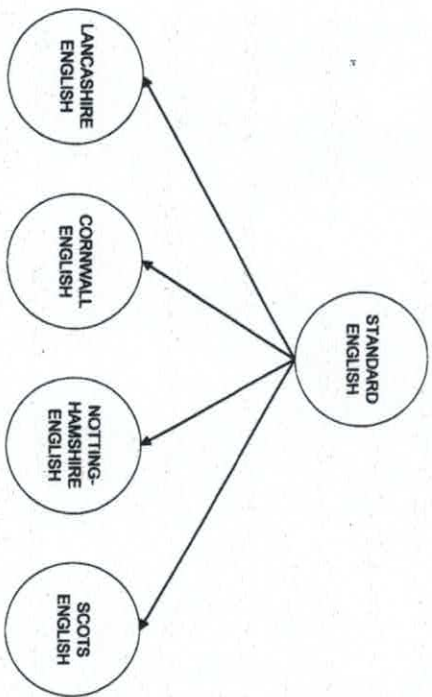
Clearly, there are many differences between these varieties. For those familiar with only standard English, it may take a blink or two to wrap your head around some of them, especially the Scots. However, all of them are obviously variations on a single plan. They are all dialects of the English language (represented in the figure that follows).

Yet we cannot help but see the standard English as the "pure" variety of the five, and the other four as variations of some sort. For this reason, some may be surprised to see that this chart does not depict standard English as the *source* of the other five dialects. (As if the situation were as diagrammed on the next page.)

This diagram would not reflect the reality. Contrary to what we might think, Lancashire, Cornwall, Scots, and Nottinghamshire are not

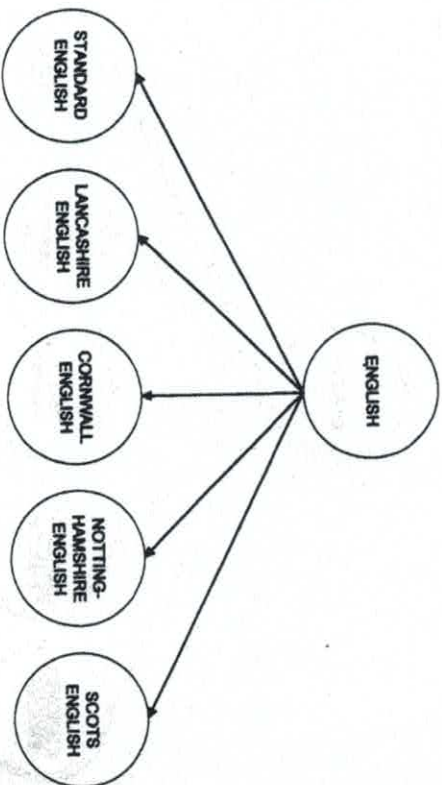






dialects of standard English—all five dialects are dialects of English (as we see in the diagram on page 25).

Where today, then, you might ask, is the English that all five are dialects of? The answer is that there is no such “default” variety of English that was the source of all of these dialects spoken—at least not anymore. All five are end products of separate branches of Old English. Thus standard English is not the source of the other four; it is just one of many branches of Old English (as shown in this figure).



As we have seen, there is simply no logical way in which standard English is any way “primal” or “ideal” or “first”—in no sense, for example, has standard English diverged less from Old English than the others have. Old English is equally alien to speakers of all five dialects. Note that this means that there simply is no living original source for these dialects that we can think of as the “true English,” unless we are willing to go back to using Old English in writing and government! But then, even Old English doesn’t lend itself to being treated as “the real English,” because Old English itself was a cover term for a bundle of dialects spoken by the various rough Germanic tribes who sailed to England from what is today Denmark, Northern Germany, and the Netherlands (the Lord’s Prayer selection on p. 9 is in the West Saxon dialect of Old English) in the fifth century. No record of the one language from which these dialects had branched off, somewhere in Northern Europe in the B.C. period, even survives. Thus properly speaking, the one language that all of today’s varieties of English are traceable to is unavailable to us, and in any case, even if we had it, it would be a post-Neolithic Old English, utterly incomprehensible to us, and full of things none of us would be prepared to consider “standard,” such as free word order (“Our daily bread give us today”) and double negation (the equivalent of “I can’t see nothing” was legal in Old English).

To take this to its extreme, even if this ancestor were still spoken by some isolated community somewhere in Denmark, we couldn’t treat it as “the real English” because since language is always changing, even that ancestral Old English tongue would have evolved into a new language by now!

Realizing this equips us to view standard English in a new light. The dialect of English that is today the standard one in Great Britain was not chosen as the standard because it was somehow purer, more logical, had a richer vocabulary, or was older than the other varieties. It was chosen simply because it happened to be the dialect spoken in the area that happened to become the center of British government and education starting in the 1300s (the dialect was mostly a mixture of the Middlesex and Essex dialects). This is the sole reason that standard English looks so “legitimate” and “neutral” to us today. If the cultural center had happened to have settled in Nottingham, then the English of the gameskeeper in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* would sound smooth and



elegant to us, and the language of Margaret Thatcher coarse and unfined! It is always this way: Parisian French is the standard because Paris is the capital of France, for example. As the axiom in linguistics goes, a standard is a dialect with an army and a navy.

This may be hard to swallow, so natural is it for us to think of standard English as somehow the real English, and dialects like Cockney and Scots (and Brooklyn English and Black English) as somehow "quaint," fun for a spin but hardly suitable for bringing home to mother. But it is true, and leads us to a simple question: If the standard dialect became a standard simply because of sociopolitical accident, then is there anything about it in terms of quality that makes it somehow the real English or "the best English"? The answer, as you might suspect, is nothing whatsoever. In terms of linguistic analysis, there is nothing which makes the English of Ed Norton on *The Homeymooners*, or Miss Brahms on *Are You Being Served?* in any way less logical, less nuanced, or less complex than the English of William F. Buckley or John Gielgud.

One often somehow feels that Brooklynesse or Cockney are somehow more "decayed" than standard English because, for example, they have *dose* instead of *those*, which takes a bit more effort to pronounce. But standard English has contracted forms like *isn't* and *doesn't*—which is lazier, *dose* or running together separate words like *is* and *not*? The answer is neither is "lazy," both are just language change as it happens over the ages. Similarly, the double negatives in both dialects—*I ain't got no books*—are often called illogical on the grounds that two negatives "equal" a positive. However, in truth, it is standard English that is slumming here because, as we noted, Old English itself had double negatives: *Ne can ic noht singan*, with its two negatives, is Old English for "I can't sing anything." In standard English, the *ne* has worn away, leaving the *noht* (now *not*) by itself.

In the same way, there are no grounds for considering Lancashire, Cornwall, Scots, and Nottinghamshire English lesser than standard English. All these dialects evolved at the same time by the exact same types of processes of change as did the standard dialect of English. If the change from Latin to French didn't create something "worse," and the change from Old English to Middlesex/Essex, a.k.a. standard, English didn't create something "worse," then what reason do we have for thinking that the change from Old English to Lancashire English created something "worse"? Surely the choice of Middlesex/Essex English as a

standard dialect was a result of history, and not vice versa. Do we suppose that the reason London became the commercial and cultural hub of England was because of the emergence of a cosmically clear and lovely dialect in Middlesex and Essex counties? Of course, we must remember that before the Norman Conquest, the commercial and cultural hub had been Winchester, far west of London. Did the capital move east because the Winchester locals were tripping over their tongues too often to suit an emerging empire? What have historians missed here? This development shows us that the nonstandard dialects are simply the lava lamps that didn't get to be in the store window.

There are communities around the world that intuit that there is nothing deficient about the nonstandard dialects that they speak, such as Scots in England and Bavarians in Germany. Their efforts to have their speech varieties recognized as legitimate often meet resistance, but in fact such people are on to the truth. When we realize that dialects are all offshoots of a single ancestor, having developed from that ancestor in the exact same ways, we see that Cockney English is no more a bad form of standard English than a Cocker Spaniel is a bad form of a Saint Bernard.

#### "NOTHING TO FEE-AH BUT FEE-AH ITSELF": WHY NOBODY ON EARTH SPEAKS "BAD GRAMMAR"

In sum, then, because (1) dialects develop through language change and language change is not decay; (2) standard English and nonstandard dialects all evolved in the same way from the same source; (3) that source is long dead and would not even be recognizable to us as English; (4) standard dialects are chosen because of historical happenstance, not their intrinsic quality; and (5) there is nothing illogical about nonstandard dialects, it follows that *there is no such thing as a deficient dialect of a language*.

Thus we see that in reality, *language* is just a useful, but artificial cover term for what is in fact a bundle of dialects. Many of us are already aware that Italian "has lots of dialects," such that the Italian of Naples or Sicily is so unlike the standard Italian we learn in school that we would have to learn it as a separate language. Most Italian immigrants to the United States came from these regions, and this is why



Italian-Americans' older relatives are more likely to say "manigawt" than the standard *manicotti* and "rih-gawt" instead of *ricotta*. Many of us realize that it is the same with German after traveling in regions where our schoolbook German is useless in helping to understand even the simplest sentences.

We are less aware, however, that this situation is not exceptional but the norm: Most languages in the world are actually, viewed up close, bundles of dialects that are variations on a single theme, but differ in crucial details. This is true of Spanish (Castilian is the standard but Aragonese, Leonese, and other dialects thrive), Russian (educated Muscovites joked about Mikhail Gorbachev's rural Russian dialect, and there are even more divergent forms as one travels east), Arabic (Tunisian, Nigerian, Sudanese, Egyptian, and Palestinian Arabic are mostly mutually unintelligible), Japanese, Swedish, Turkish, Swahili, Dutch, Finnish, and just about any language most of us can think of. Berlitz teaches the standard dialects, but to many or most of the actual speakers, this is written or formal language only. Only when a language is spoken by a small community with only a few hundred or thousand speakers does it come in just a single variety.

Like our discomfort with language changes like *who/whom*, many of our everyday conceptions of dialects are the results of distortions lent by the limited perspective of our brief life spans. Here in the twentieth century, the gradual transformation of Middlesex and Essex English from rural "local talks" into the speech of an upper class is lost in the history books. We live in a world where standard English is virtually the only English written down, used in official or international venues, or taught in. More to the point, these contexts are dominated by people in power, hence people in power speak the standard dialect, and thus the standard is naturally associated with prestige and success. In such a context, it is not surprising that other dialects end up looking like bastardizations of the standard instead of legitimate, independent developments. Indeed, much of our sense that a dialect is a standard one is due simply to it being written down. Today, the Occitan of southern France is popularly considered a nonstandard French "dialect." In the Middle Ages, however, its "Provençal" variety was a vehicle of literature and the songs of the Troubadors, and in this guise the same speech now considered so homely was treated as a competing standard.

In an episode of *Fawlty Towers*, Basil Fawlty's wife asks him why, if he took Spanish in school, he cannot speak Spanish with Manuel, their assistant from Barcelona. Basil sniffs "I learnt classical Spanish, not that strange dialect he seems to have picked up." Fawlty's wording likens a dialect to some kind of disease going around, a common misconception of dialects being the results of bad habits. Similarly, we often hear it said of people that they speak with "no dialect at all," as if standard English were not a dialect itself. Both of these types of statements reflect the conception of nonstandard dialects as deformations or evidence of humankind's birth in Original Sin, rather than as just the one in a litter who happened to "make it."

In America, the notion of standard becomes even more arbitrary than it is in Great Britain. American English is the product of a chaotic mixture of many British dialects brought here by the original colonists, of which the Middlesex/Essex standard was only one. (Others were as exotic to our ear as the Cornwall and Nottinghamshire examples on p. 25.) Of course, *American English* is itself a cover term for a group of dialects, such as Southern, New England, Midwestern, Appalachian, African American, and urban, like Brooklynese. However, none of these dialects can be traced to any single British dialect. All of these dialects developed from the random mixtures of colonists from many parts of England, as well as colonists from other European countries who spoke Dutch, French, German, Swedish, and other languages. Furthermore, Southern English is partly traceable to the English of African-born slaves, who were a majority of the population in many places during the plantation era. Any kind of purity is thus a hopeless contradiction in terms when it comes to American English varieties.

This puts the conception of standard English in America in a certain perspective. Just as in England where the "Received pronunciation" of the BBC is thought of as "correct," in America a certain Midwestern-derived "flat" variety, typical of newscasters, is considered the "pure" English. However, what could possibly be pure about a dialect that itself is a mixture of various British dialects—many, for whatever it's worth, nonstandard dialects so commonly considered impure?

In fact, the conception of standard English in America is even more obviously arbitrary than in Great Britain, in that within the lifetime of



many Americans, the anointed standard has changed from one dialect to another. You may have noticed that actors in old movies often speak in an accent that sounds affected to us, where there is no *r* after vowels: Bette Davis, for example, would say "Pee-tah! The lett-ah" instead of "Peter! The letter!" We can also hear this in Franklin D. Roosevelt's, "We have nothing to fee-ah but fee-ah itself," and Jack Haley as the Tin Woodsman in *The Wizard of Oz* singing "If I Only Had a Hahht." Davis, Roosevelt, and Haley were not affecting pretentious British accents. On the contrary, this "r-less" accent was typical of American Northeastern cities at the time, and because the Northeast has traditionally been the cultural center of America, theirs was considered the standard American English. Genuine Northeasterners like Davis, Roosevelt, and Haley spoke this way naturally, and those performers who did not were often taught to in elocution lessons.

This accent passed out of fashion after World War II, however, in favor of the Midwestern accent, a heartland variety in tune with a country awash in red-blooded jingoism, glorifying ex-soldiers who hailed from all over the country, not just the Northeast. The tony-sounding "r-less variety" appeared a tad exclusionary and effete in these times, and by the late 1940s, radio and television announcers were trained to sound like what we now know as the speech style of Walter Cronkite. Clearly, this beige brand of Midwestern English has no claim to greater legitimacy than the "rounded tones" of Franklin D. Roosevelt—the choice of a standard has nothing to do with the quality of the speech variety itself. Today, Barbara Walters's *r*-less speech is considered a joke, when, in fact, a mere sixty years ago, her speech would have been the most prestigious English an American could aspire to. We can be quite sure that if Atlanta had happened to become the cultural and financial center of the country, the Southern English of Jimmy Carter would be thought of as inherently the "proper way to speak."

Therefore like British English, the term *American English* is a convenient cover for what is in fact a bundle of dialects. *English* is in turn a convenient cover term for the British bundle of dialects, the American bundle of dialects, plus the many other Englishes around the world, such as Australian, South African, Indian, West African, Irish, Singaporean, and others, all of which are themselves actually bundles of dialects. Nowhere on Earth is there any variety of English which we can

in any logical sense call the purest or the default English, nor has such a language ever existed that we would even recognize as English.

Put simply, the term *language* is shorthand for a collection of dialects, of which one happens to be used by the elite and written down, while the others are not. The first is the standard dialect. The others are non-standard dialects—but in no sense are they substandard.