

Folk Linguistics



Trends in Linguistics

Studies and Monographs 122

Editor

Werner Winter

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York

Folk Linguistics

by

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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 2000

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin.

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines
of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Niedzielski, Nancy A., 1964–
Folk linguistics / by Nancy A. Niedzielski, Dennis R.
Preston.
p. cm. – (Trends in linguistics. Studies and mono-
graphs ; 122)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 3-11-016251-2 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Linguistics. 2. Language awareness. I. Preston, Dennis
Richard. II. Title. III. Series.
P123.N48 1999
418–dc21

99-051346
CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Niedzielski, Nancy A.:
Folk linguistics / by Nancy A. Niedzielski ; Dennis R.
Preston. – Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 2000
(Trends in linguistics : Studies and monographs ; 122)
ISBN 3-11-016251-2

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ical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, with-
out permission in writing from the publisher.
Disk conversion: Readymade, Berlin.
Printing: Werner Hildebrand, Berlin.
Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin.
Printed in Germany.

For Keith Denning – Linguist, colleague, mentor, friend

Foreword

One of the most exciting things that is happening in the academic world today is the small steps we are beginning to make towards destroying ... elitism. Although the trend for many years was toward ever-increasing degrees of specialization with concomitant scorn for all that was not specialized, such a position is less well received in today's world. (Shuy 1973:313)

This is a book of *stankos*, a term Leonard Bloomfield's family used to describe the language beliefs of nonlinguists.¹ It is no accident that it looks like a noun form of *stank*, for Bloomfield held the opinion of nonlinguists in low regard; many linguists have shared and continue to share that opinion.

We have sought out and even encouraged *stankos*, for we believe that what the folk believe about language deserves careful consideration. This is justified along several lines:

1. The study of folk beliefs about language is one of the ethnographies of a culture. In ethnobotany one wants to learn (at least) a culture's beliefs about the naming of, relationships among, and uses for plants. Ethnolinguistics should do the same, but the contrast between folk and scientific linguistics will be more complex than that between many other ethnosciences and their academic partners, particularly in a nonhomogeneous, post-modern society.

The role of language and its attendant beliefs ought to be set in the larger framework of the culture under investigation, for ethnolinguistics may not be just more complex than ethnobotany or ethnogeology, but more complex in subtle ways. If it is believed (and reported) that a certain plant is good for settling the stomach, it would be odd to find it seldom used for that purpose (unless some taboo restricted its use). A contrast between belief and use in language, however, is not an uncommon state of affairs; this apparent mismatch requires greater subtlety in combining an ethnolinguistics with a study of language in use.²

2. In the general area of applied linguistics, folk linguistics surely plays a most important role. When professionals want to have influence, they are, we believe, ill-advised to ignore popular belief, and, as we have discovered in our fieldwork for this book, popular belief about language is both ubiquitous and strong. It is surely as risky for a linguist to try to influence the public as it is for a doctor to try to

treat a population without knowing that *the sugar* is their local folk term for diabetes.

3. Finally, folk linguistic beliefs may help determine the shape of language itself. It would be unusual to discover that what nonlinguists believe about language has nothing to do with linguistic change; in one sense, of course, that has been a principal focus of investigation in the more than thirty year old tradition of quantitative (or “Labovian”) sociolinguistics.

Penultimately, a word about the folk in this book. We use *folk* to refer to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation (although we would not for one moment deny the fact that professional linguists themselves are also a folk group, with their own rich set of beliefs). We definitely do not use *folk* to refer to rustic, ignorant, uneducated, backward, primitive, minority, isolated, marginalized, or lower status groups or individuals. That is an outdated use in folklore and an absolutely useless one for our purposes. We intend to study the texture of folk belief about language in a speech community, and we include the beliefs of respondents from a great variety of backgrounds. To do otherwise would be to assume that folklore and cultural anthropology are not doable where we live. We also adopt from modern folklore the notion that folk belief is simply belief, its folk character being no indication of its truth or falsity.

Finally, we hold to the notion that the study of folk behavior is dynamic as well as static. We have observed the routes the folk follow in thinking through problems about language as well as the contents of their prepackaged items and structures of belief.

Acknowledgments

The authors are first of all grateful to their colleagues who served as fieldworkers during the two-semester seminar in sociolinguistics and folk linguistics held at Eastern Michigan University during the 1987-88 academic year. Without their good contacts, thoughtful interviews, and careful transcriptions, this work could never have been done. Next in line come our respondents – all those who put up with the silly questions and demands of linguists; they have been patient and forthcoming. We hope only that our open-ended style of interviewing gave them some fun as well as us some profit.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation (BNS-8711267) and the Graduate School and Office of Research Development of Eastern Michigan University; of course, they are not responsible for the conclusions reached here, only for the subvention of some of the time and wherewithal to reach them.

Our colleagues at Eastern Michigan University, The University of California at Santa Barbara, and Michigan State University have put up with folk linguistics for a long time. We thank them for their patience as well as their insights. We are especially grateful to Patricia M. Clancy of UCSB who gave us important advice for 4.1 (First-language acquisition.)

Werner Winter, the Editor of this series, read the manuscript for this book with great care. We are indebted to him for both substantive and stylistic suggestions.

Carol Preston read every word in this book. She is more than a little responsible for whatever clarity and stylistic panache it has; we will have to claim responsibility for the rest.

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Chapter 2

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Transcription conventions

1. [[simultaneous utterances (A and B start talking at the same time)

A: [[I used to party a lot when I was younger

B: [[I used to study linguistics until

2. [overlapping utterances (B begins to talk while A is talking)

A: I had a lot of trouble with morphology

B: [I see

3.] end of overlapping or simultaneous utterance (not used unless the duration of the overlap is not well represented by the physical size of the transcription)

A: I had a lot of trouble with - uh - morphology.

B: [] Oh! Did you really?

4. = linked or continuing utterances (no overlap, but no pause between utterances)

a. for different speakers

1) single

A: I like functionalism=

B: =No wonder.

2) more than one (in either first or second position)

A: I like functionalism=

B: =[[No wonder.

C: =[[So do I!

b. for the same speaker (a continuation device based only on page width limitations; see also 10. below)

xviii *Transcription conventions*

A: I wanted to study a non-Indo-European language before=

 |
B: You did.

A: =starting my Ph.D.

5. Intervals

- a. - untimed (brief), within utterances (See also 6.j. below)

A: I thought - uh - I would go home.

- b. ((pause)) untimed (brief), between utterances

A: What do you think.

((pause))

B: Well. - I don't know.

- c. 1.0, 3.0, 0.5, etc... times within and between utterances (in tenths of a second)

6. Delivery

- a. : length (repeated to show greater length)

A: Way to go:.

B: Yeah. Way to go:.

- b. . falling ("final") intonation (followed by a noticeable pause, not based on grammatical considerations)

A: By the way.

- c. , continuing ("list") intonation (a slight rise or fall followed by a short pause, again, not based on grammatical considerations)

A: I saw Bill,

- d. ? rising ("question") intonation (followed by a noticeable pause, again not based on grammatical considerations)

A: He left?

- e. **CAPS** emphasis (emphatic or contrastive stress — "I" is underlined)

A: He LEFT?

- f. **(hhh)** breathe out and **(.hhh)** breathe in

A: (.hhh) Oh, thank you.

B: (hhh) That's a break.

- g. **(())** noises, kinds of talk, comments

A: I used to ((cough)) smoke too much.
 ((telephone rings))

- h. **!** animated talk

A: Look out for that rock!

- i. **(h)** breathiness (usually laughter)

A: I wou(h)ldn't do that.

- j. - abrupt cutoff (glottal stop, always attached to what precedes; N.B.:
 when - is used for pause [5.a above] it is never attached to what
 precedes)

A: Look ou-

7. **()** transcriber doubt

- a. a guess at the words in question

A: I (suppose I'm not)

- b. a guess at some part of the words in question

B: We all (t-)

- c. no guess at the words in question

A: ()

- d. two equally reasonable guesses at the words in question

A: I (spoke to Mark)
 (suppose I'm not)

xx *Transcription conventions*

8. [] phonetic transcription

A: I saw the dog [dag]

9. ----- omitted material from the same conversation

A: I used to smoke too much.

A: My uncle Harry died of lung cancer.

10. Enumeration: In some conversations analyzed and cited here, “lines” are numbered each time there is a speaker change associated with a line change. These numbers, therefore, mark no grammatical or discoursal units of text. In the following, for example, 72 R and 74 R are part of the same utterance but have different numbers because they are interrupted by the beginning of the 73-75 D contribution, itself separated in the same way.

72 R: So it's h- it's hard for me to rem- think you know (of) Black=

73 D: [Course you did cause your - =

74 R: =dialect.

75 D: =brothers, your brothers used it quite a bit. (#35)

11. Citation form: When the conversations collected for this study are cited, participants are identified by an initial following the number, if any (see above); the conversation itself is identified by a number in parentheses at the end of the quotation (see above). The appendix provides more complete identification of the participants and the conversational settings. Since initials may be repeated across (but not within) conversations, it will be important to note the conversation number to keep identities straight.

12. Spelling: When pronunciation is focused on, phonetic transcription is used; we particularly avoid (and deplore) the “folk respellings” employed in some conversation studies. In our opinion, they serve only to caricature respondents and/or detract from readability (Preston 1982b, 1983, 1985).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Folk linguistics has not fared well in the history of the science, and linguists have generally taken an “us” versus “them” position. From a scientific perspective, folk beliefs about language are, at best, innocent misunderstandings of language (perhaps only minor impediments to introductory linguistic instruction) or, at worst, the bases of prejudice, leading to the continuation, reformulation, rationalization, justification, and even development of a variety of social injustices.

There is no doubt that comments on language, what Bloomfield called “secondary responses,” may both amuse and annoy linguists when they are made by nonprofessionals, and there is no doubt, as well, that the folk are not happy to have some of these notions contradicted (Bloomfield’s “tertiary response”):

A physician, of good general background and education, who had been hunting in the north woods, told me that the Chippewa language contains only a few hundred words. Upon question, he said that he got this information from his guide, a Chippewa Indian. When I tried to state the diagnostic setting, the physician, our host, briefly and with signs of displeasure repeated his statement and then turned his back on me. A third person, observing this discourtesy, explained that I had some experience of the language in question. This information had no effect. (Bloomfield 1944 [1970:418])

Although Bloomfield is perhaps most annoyed by Dr. X’s misinformation, he is also unhappy with his inability to accept expert advice (and, perhaps, the emotional manner with which it was rejected).¹

It is, however, what Bloomfield calls “the diagnostic setting” which concerns us. Bloomfield doubtless has a complete understanding of the linguistic facts (Chippewa has more than a few hundred words!), but his account of the social and psychological impulses which influence the beliefs of Dr. X are speculative. We must infer what Bloomfield believes to be “the diagnostic setting,” but it is not hard for a professional linguist to do so:

1. Nonlinguists often believe some languages are primitive, impoverished in various ways, including vocabulary size.
2. Nonlinguists often believe in an ethnic or racial genetics of language; therefore, a Chippewa guide can speak Chippewa.

2 Introduction

3. Nonlinguists often believe there is no such thing as a science of language; therefore, native speakers (the guide) and intelligent laypersons (Dr. X) are authorities.

Our concern is that Bloomfield, as we have here, has imagined rather than discovered this set of folk-linguistic beliefs. They may be the proper inferences to have been drawn from Dr. X's behavior, but we have very little evidence to go on. The complex set of beliefs Dr. X holds about language and linguistics is not further investigated. From an ethnographic point of view, Bloomfield has carried out a participant-observation study of a few minutes and reached a conclusion. Folk linguistics surely requires more time. We hope to show how the data of linguistic folk belief may be more systematically collected and interpreted, and this first chapter sets our study in a broader historical framework and describes the way we went about collecting our data.

1.1 Background

The tradition is much older,² but we shall date interest in folk linguistics from the 1964 UCLA Sociolinguistics Conference and Hoenigswald's presentation there entitled "A proposal for the study of folk-linguistics" (Hoenigswald 1966).

... we should be interested not only in (a) what goes on (language), but also in (b) how people react to what goes on (they are persuaded, they are put off, etc.) and in (c) what people say goes on (talk concerning language). It will not do to dismiss these secondary and tertiary modes of conduct merely as sources of error. (Hoenigswald 1966:20)

Hoenigswald lays out a broadly-conceived plan for the study of talk about language, including collections of the folk expressions for various speech acts and of the folk terminology for, and the definitions of, grammatical categories such as *word* and *sentence*. He proposes uncovering folk accounts of homonymy and synonymy, regionalism and language variety, and social structure (e.g., age, sex) as reflected in speech. He suggests that particular attention be paid to folk accounts of the correcting of linguistic behavior, especially in the context of first-language acquisition and in relation to accepted ideas of correctness and acceptability. He recommends asking what sorts of language and speech styles are admired and what sorts have special status under the general rubric of taboo. He urges researchers to seek historical folk-linguistic accounts as well as folk accounts of language abnormalities (e.g., stuttering, muteness).

1.1.1 Objections to folk-linguistic study

This wide-ranging set of suggestions has been taken up very little in subsequent work, at least in any general or systematic way, and we shall deal first with reasons for that failure before exploring some precursors to the work reported on here. That folk-beliefs are simply unscientific and worthy only of disdain is an opinion we have already illustrated in our citation of Bloomfield above and dismissed in our Foreword³; here we turn to two more sophisticated objections, one which suggests that folk linguistics is impoverished, another which suggests it is largely inaccessible.

1.1.1.1 Impoverishment of data. The impoverishment issue is raised by Labov immediately following Hoenigswald's 1964 presentation:

The overt responses in American and English society generally are quite poor as far as vocabulary is concerned. "Poverty-stricken" would be the best term for this vocabulary. The inadequacy of people's overt remarks about their own language is directly reflected in the fact that there are only a few words that they use to convey the subjective response that they feel. ... But some of the references made here today show that there are highly institutionalized folk attitudes toward language which are much richer than those which we are accustomed to meeting in the U.S. and England. (Labov, discussion of Hoenigswald 1966:23)

That a folk vocabulary is inadequate is a strange notion. If one could show that there is a strong pattern of responses which the folk are interested in talking about but are incapable of doing so due to vocabulary deficiency, then one might say that a language or variety was inadequate. We believe, however, that a language would not long languish in such inadequacy; if the concept has worked its way out into the open, it will surely get a word. (The Bloomfields had no trouble coming up with *stanko*!) In his own work, Labov singles out features which rather obviously do have labels and makes the point that they are linguistic *stereotypes*, items which are the subject matter of speech-community comment (e.g., Labov 1972a:248). If Labov means only to say that the folk lack a vocabulary to describe that of which they are not aware, we do not object, although, as suggested above, we shall have more to say about *aware*, especially in 1.1.2.

Perhaps Labov's judgment of Anglo-American folk linguistic impoverishment reflects the focus in his New York City studies; his two examples of the vocabulary he characterizes come from phonology (*nasal* and *twang*). From the point of view of linguistic structure, he does not speak of folk terminology (or concern) for morphology,

lexicon (including meaning), grammar, semantics, or higher levels of discourse organization or genre type. From other perspectives still central to general linguistics, he does not speak of folk notions of language origin, spread, and change, nor of those of acquisition (first or second), multilingualism, and intelligibility. He does not comment, either, on whether a rich or minimal terminology exists for a host of social linguistic phenomena (many of which are so carefully elaborated in his own work): region, age, ethnicity, status, and the like along with attendant interactional and situational characteristics of formality, power, setting, solidarity, and so on. (See Preston 1986b for an attempt to gather together the range of such concerns.) In short, if phonological folk-linguistic terminology is small in the Anglo-American tradition (a conclusion with which we tend to agree; see below), that is no reason to abandon the rest of the field.

We also believe that Labov has been too hasty in dismissing what folk-linguistic information he *has* uncovered. His account of *nasal* is as follows:

Frequently, if you ask somebody what he thinks of this style of speech (nasalized), he'll say it's very "nasal"; and if you produce a speech of this sort (denasalized), he'll say that's very "nasal" too. In other words, the denasalized speech characteristics of some urban areas and extremely nasalized speech are treated in the same way. (Labov, discussion of Hoenigswald 1966:23-4)

Disregarding this folk account overlooks both its sophistication and the clues it carries for further investigation.

It is sophisticated phonetically, for the respondents Labov describes use *nasal* to describe a nasal phenomenon; whether over- or underemployed, it is that feature (accurately) they hit upon.⁴ More importantly, the hint for further research is buried by the contention that nasalized and denasalized speech are "treated in the same way." There are two problems lurking here: 1. Does the fact that they are labeled in the same way mean that they are treated in the same way? The attitudinal responses to denasalized speech might be considerably different from those to nasalized speech. If that is so, then Labov's complaint that the folk terminology is limited might be correct, as we acknowledge above; respondents might react differently to nasalized and denasalized forms, but have no terminology to differentiate these perceptually distinct stimuli, for the specific linguistic features which influence the behavior are not analytically known. That does not entail, however, that the different stimuli are "treated in the same way." 2. Does the ambiguous folk-phonetic terminology mask other unambiguous terminology which might consistently dif-

ferentiate nasalized and denasalized speakers (e.g., *whiney* versus *doltish*, respectively)?⁵ The misunderstandings lurking here may spring from linguists and/or the folk having missing terms in their accounts, sharing terms with different meanings, or even constructing systems in different ways. Figure 1.1 contrasts two models.

At level 1, terminological richness is greater for the linguists, who have a name for the phenomenon in general, but the first component of level 2 is a draw; neither linguists nor the folk have a term which refers specifically to appropriately nasalized speech, although that is undoubtedly one of the requirements for such generalized folk evaluations as *pleasant* or *normal*. In the second component of level 2, there is a folk term. What is “nasal” is “inappropriately nasalized,” a describable concept for the linguist, but one without a specific term. Level 3 is also a draw; both linguists and nonlinguists have terms for the subcategories of inappropriately nasalized speech. Although this examination suggests that the folk vocabulary may be as large as the linguistic one for some of the elements it covers, it may also differ considerably from the technical one.

For example, the terminological mismatch which bothers Labov occurs between component two of level 2 in the folk taxonomy and component one of level 3 in the linguistic one: the folk use “nasal” for inappropriate amounts of nasality on either end of the scale; linguists use the form most like it (“nasalized”) for only the excessive end.⁶

Of course, the folk have been permitted to change point of view (at least from a scientific perspective) in order to fill out their taxonomy. What began as a discussion of raised or lowered velum turned to one of personality or attitude. One of the styles of characterizing data demanded and admired by science is a consistent point of view; no such stringent demand is made on the folk. Such shifts, however, make folk taxonomies elaborate and overlapping, and the elicitation, characterization, and interpretation of folk belief is made both more complex and rewarding as a result. We shall refer to the need to examine the shifting perspective of folk respondents throughout.⁷

6 Introduction

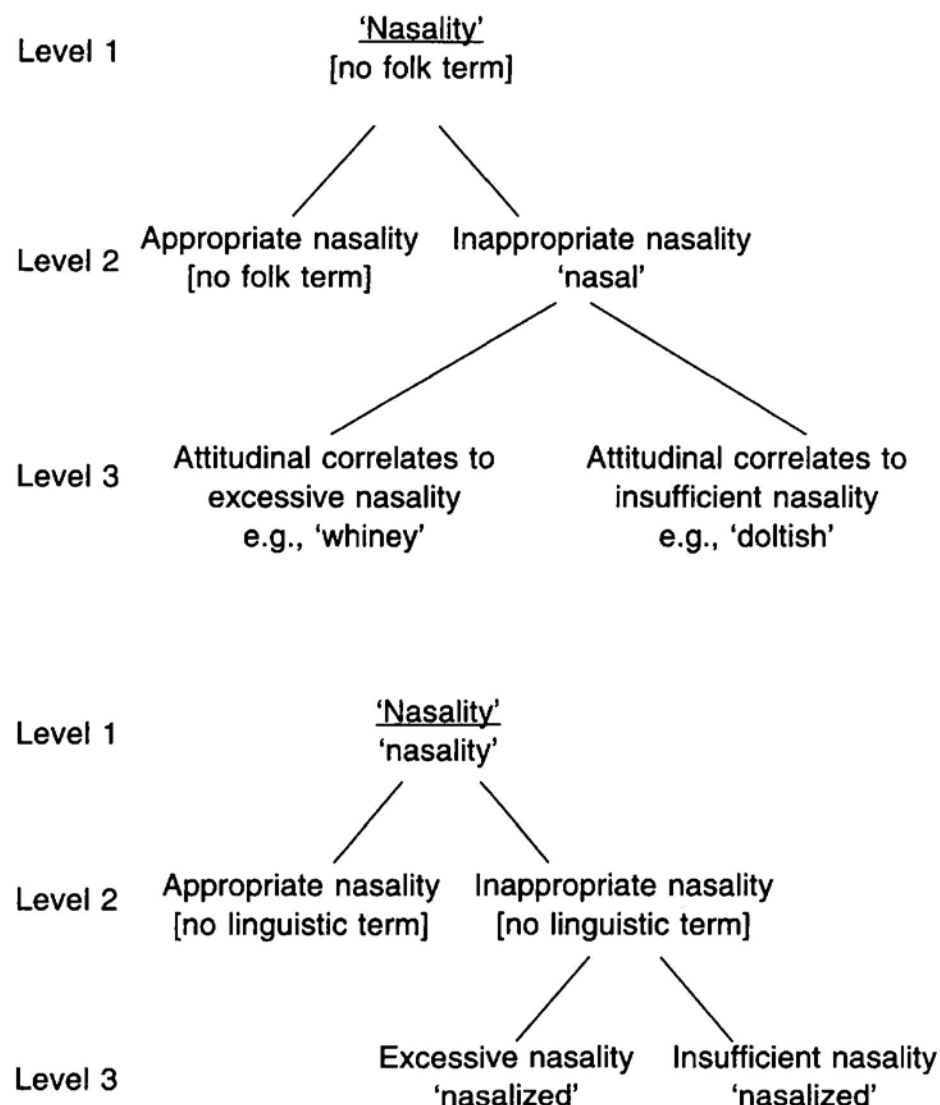


Figure 1.1 Folk (top) and linguistic (bottom) taxonomies of "nasality"

Our treatment of folk-linguistic data takes these complex shifts into consideration and tries to set them in a dynamic context of actual use, not in a static one of folk linguistic knowledge. This point of view has allowed us to find an abundant traditional and creative folk linguistics, one operating at many levels of linguistic structure and in many areas of language concern. Although his focus is on vocabulary, Sherzer reflects this general attitude in the following:

... terms for talk ... are communicative resources which vary from person to person and from context to context and are used strategically in the course of speaking. In addition, there are significant features of ... language and speech that are not labeled, and there are labels that are ambiguous without reference to contextualization in concrete instances of usage. (Sherzer 1983:16)

1.1.1.2 Inaccessibility of data. The second impediment to folk linguistic research has been the touted inaccessibility to the folk consciousness of linguistically interesting matters. Although we agree that there is much that is not available to folk awareness, that concern has been overworked. There are at least four such research traditions which cast doubt on ordinary speakers' abilities to bring linguistic phenomena into awareness:

1. General linguistics: Attempting to discover the hidden organizational principles of language design, linguists have teased out information from native speakers. Observing that people in a speech community respond differently to, say, the two phonetic strings [p^hit] and [p^hIt], the linguist begins to ask if a number of pairs such as [bit] – [bIt] and [lid] – [lId] are the same or different. The native speaker notes that they are all different, for, indeed, one may dig *peat* [p^hit] from a *pit* [p^hIt] but not vice versa, and so on. Thus the linguist discovers and is able to give a verbal account of the fact that the speakers of this language distinguish phonemically between the high front tense vowel [i] and the high front lax vowel [I], a terminology representing a set of concepts apparently not available to the awareness of the native speakers. Similar operations may expose other levels of structure. In attempting to discover the status of /swIm/, the linguist finds from native speakers that it is insertable into frames such as *I can _____* and *I _____ every morning* but not into those such as *I know _____* or *_____ know you*. Eventually some such technical term as *verb* is used to describe the membership class to which this item belongs. Traditional linguistic theory, therefore, is an attempt to *know about* what the native speaker simply knows how to do. Generally speaking, home-grown attempts of the speakers themselves to know about language are disregarded.

With the advent of interest in semanto-syntax, the areas of knowing about became so abstract compared to the earlier interest in the closed sets of phonemes and word classes that nonlinguist native speakers were often circumvented. Linguists began to focus more deeply on their own languages and tested their intuitions concerning marginal constructions which pushed the limits of their growing understanding of the operating principles of language itself. It simply took too much explanation or “respondent training” to get a naive

native speaker to avoid consideration of social and other influences not at stake in the linguist's judgment of grammaticality. For example, it takes considerable pains to get a nonlinguist to admit that *He sent a letter to himself* is ungrammatical (or not well-formed) if the intended reading is one in which *he* and *himself* are not coreferential. They *are* coreferential for the nonlinguist, and the idea that that sentence is in any sense an exemplar of their noncoreferentiality (and is, therefore, ungrammatical) is a heady exercise in abstraction. Attempts to short-cut the abstraction in psycholinguistic experiments using cleverly constructed sample sentences which contrasted at just the points of concern have often proved unwieldy, and many modern grammarians are happy to be their own sources of information on grammaticality.⁸

2. Social psychology: Attitudinal responses to the nonpropositional aspects of linguistic performance have been elicited from the folk. In the classic model of this research (Lambert et al. 1960), one speaker (to avoid voice-quality influences) provides two performances (hidden among others and at some distance from one another) – the *matched guise* technique. The two performances vary the feature under investigation (e. g., the first performance is French, the second English; the first performance contains no [or fewer] examples of a post-vocalic /r/, the second no deletions [or fewer], and so on). The respondents rate these performances along scales like the following:

ugly _____ pretty

The polar opposites for these scales have been drawn from surveys in which respondents have been asked to list adjectives which describe speech and language (a step often skipped, since many researchers rely on lists derived from earlier work). Means scores and factor analyses of the judgments of these pairs are then computed. A finding common to many speech communities is that respondents value local, nonstandard varieties for honesty, sincerity, and the like, and superposed, standard varieties for intelligence, industry, and so on (e.g., Ryan, Giles, and Sebastian 1982).

The degree of awareness of the linguistic variable is not really at stake in such studies. In some cases (e.g., French versus English), the respondents obviously have a folk awareness and terminology to describe the variation. In others, they have a folk awareness of the variable, but specific post-task interviews (of ratings of more or less stop versus fricative performances of /θ/ and /ð/ in New York City, for

example) show that in some cases they cannot name the variable being manipulated in the performance on which their evaluations were based (Labov 1966:315). In still others, respondents can characterize the global difference between varieties (e.g., regional differences) but cannot name specific lower-level features, and in still others, respondents have neither global nor specific labels to attach to varieties or features which they, nevertheless, show a consistent pattern of differentiated responses to.

What is sought in language attitude research is, therefore, not any linguistic level. One does not ask if French is *nicer* than English or if post-vocalic /r/ deletion is *less intelligent* than its presence. Those underlying questions are submerged in a search for responses to a wide variety of evaluations which mediate between the speakers or sorts of speakers to whom such evaluations might be assigned and the linguistic facts which guide them. A language attitude is, after all, not really an attitude to a language feature; it is an awakening of a set of beliefs about individuals or sorts of individuals through the filter of a linguistic performance, although, admittedly, association with a linguistic feature and a group may be so long-standing that the attitude appears to be to the linguistic feature itself (e.g., Milroy and McClenaghan 1977).

Such matched-guise and other tests presumably circumvent respondent tendencies in more direct questioning to take positions which present an optimum image of self to the interviewer (even if the interviewer is hidden behind a paper-and-pencil task). In general, language attitude research seeks folk information but tries to get around the conscious, reflective processes of folk reasoning and/or interaction. It avoids a report of the attitude, inferring it from responses to samples of use.

3. Quantitative sociolinguistics: Sociolinguists have made use of attitude studies, often modified to measure specific rather than global features and often used in conjunction with scales of social status (e.g., job titles) rather than with paired adjectives. The more general suspicion of folk awareness in quantitative sociolinguistics, however, runs deeper. The reasoning goes as follows: When people are aware that their speech is being investigated, their self-monitoring devices are turned up. The resulting performances are a combination of their unconscious, most systematic (*vernacular*) language rules and superposed models of schooling, proscription, prescription, erudition, deference, defensiveness, formality, and who knows what else. Observed language is, therefore, least like systematic, unreflective rule-oriented behavior, the description of which is, presumably, the goal of linguistics. Since recordings of actual language use awaken this

monitor and since surreptitious collection is difficult, illegal, and/or unethical, sociolinguists are confronted with the *observer's paradox* (e.g., Labov 1972a:209).

This sociolinguistic rubric which addresses use seems to have rubbed off on accounts of use. It is likely that when respondents are questioned about language, those same influences which are at play in the performance monitor are highlighted, and the account given reflects them rather than vernacular attitudes and opinions.

4. *Ethnographic approaches*: It may seem unusual for ethnographic approaches to be listed among those lines of research which devalue folk opinion, but, no matter how broadly conceived the modern ethnography of speaking has become, there remains in it a decided prejudice for getting at the meaning of behavior not open to the folk. Ethnosensitive participant-observers are able to see through superficial activity (and folk accounts of it) and come up with interpretations of the structure and covert meanings of behavior. Some such scholarship includes contrasts of folk accounts with observation and interpretation, and a grounded ethnography specifically uses folk explanation of behavior. In the long run, such work still seeks a contrast between the folk account and the trained observer's account, the latter intended to seek levels unknown to the former.

Since, however, talk about talk is itself a behavior, ethnographers have been forced to attend to the subject matter of this book, and we shall have a little more to say about some of these successful enterprises later.

1.1.2 Folk-linguistic awareness

If the folk talk about language, they must, of course, know (or at least believe they know) about it. Silverstein (1981) attempts to describe the sorts of linguistic detail which are more (and less) likely to be available to folk scrutiny (or awareness). He suggests five conditions which predict (or enhance) such awareness: 1. unavoidable referentiality, 2. continuous segmentability, 3. relative presuppositionality, 4. decontextualized deducibility, and 5. metapragmatic transparency. Since these are not folk-linguistic terms themselves, we provide the following glosses:

1. Linguistic units either point to something (in a real or ideational world) or they do not; that is, they either do or do not have "reference." Silverstein illustrates "unavoidable referentiality" with the deference-to-hearer versus solidarity-with-hearer pragmatic system of many European languages – e.g., German *Sie* (deferential)

versus *du* (solidary); French *vous* (deferential) versus *tu* (solidary). These items are unavoidably referential, for, although they carry the pragmatic meaning of deference and solidarity, at the same time, they refer to individuals – e.g., *du* does not just “mean” solidarity (in the pragmatic system); it also “means” *you* (in the referential system) (Silverstein 1981:5). In contrast, the raising of the low-front vowel (i.e., [æ] to [ɛ] or even [I]) in northern U.S. cities (e.g., Labov 1994) is also richly pragmatic, carrying at least such speaker and situational characteristics as gender, status, area (rural versus urban), and degree of formality. On the other hand, the low-front vowel (in any of its guises), is not in itself referential. That is, the low-front vowel – or, as sociolinguists prefer to say, the variable (æ), for it may be pronounced in a non-low front position – does not by itself pick out or refer to anything in the real or ideational world.

Silverstein suggests that the pragmatic meanings of unavoidably referential forms are more likely to be a part of folk-linguistic awareness, and in the case of the examples given above, he is correct. Europeans are aware of the pragmatic system symbolized by alternative forms of the second-person singular pronoun; they even discuss it, we are told, when linguists are not within earshot. On the contrary, residents of such places as Detroit, where the low-front vowel raising described above is going on, are overtly aware of neither the change in progress nor of the pragmatic meanings the change supports.

It is possible to think of folk-linguistic exceptions to Silverstein’s predictions. For example, the items *can* and *could*, which clearly bear some referential load, are part of a pragmatic politeness system (Brown and Levinson 1987); past-marked modal auxiliaries (e.g., *could*, *would*) are “more polite” than non-past-marked forms (e.g., *can*, *will*). Native speakers of English, who unconsciously apply the system and even rate the forms appropriately on “scale of politeness” tests, are not, however, usually overtly aware of the pragmatic opposition. Perhaps the low-level or “abstract” referentiality of such forms as modals (and other “structure” words) contributes to their subconscious rather than overt realization as members of pragmatic systems.

On the other hand, the presence or absence of nonprevocalic /r/ in New York City speech, although highly symbolic in the pragmatic system (i.e., /r/-presence symbolizing higher social class membership and greater formality and /r/-absence symbolizing the opposite), is not, in itself, referential. In this case, however, /r/ has become a linguistic “stereotype” (Labov 1972a), an item which, regardless of its referentiality, is fully available to the awareness of speech-

community members. It is impossible, therefore, to predict accurately on the basis of linguistic status alone which items *may* play a part in the folk linguist's conscious repertoire, and the remaining four of Silverstein's predictors will have similar probabilistic rather than categorical values.

In some other cases, however, a nonreferential linguistic level (e.g., phonology) may be available to folk awareness, but in a general or "global" way. Folk respondents are aware, for example, of some undifferentiated non-native accents, dialect varieties (often those which awaken no strong attitudinal responses), temporary speech disturbances (e.g., colds, drunkenness), superposed prescriptions, and so on. What is interesting about just these examples is that, although phonology is the area referred to in the account, specific items are usually not available to the folk.

B: A friend of mine was from North er yeah she's from North Dakota and when she came here she lived here for several years and she had a funny? way of describing the way midwesterners talk.

M: Um hum.

B: And she'd say you guys talk real funny. She said you talk up and down. And she said out in North Dakota we talk sideways. I said D. Explain that to me what is up and down and sideways talk. She said that's the only way I can describe it. (#38)⁹

Here we may be tempted to agree with Labov that, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, folk terms for phonological matters (intonation?) are lacking. Another of our respondents says her older relatives spoke with a strong Polish accent, but she could offer no details. Such general references to pronunciation contrast sharply with specific accounts of items usually when the folk view has been shaped by a strong attitudinal caricature:

J: (imitating "New Jersey" speech) Twe- [twi] tree little boids, sitting on a coib - eating doity woi(h)- - eating doity woims and saying=

M: [((laughs))] ((laughs))

J: =doity woids. (#38)

Here J, although he may not be able to articulate it in the following terms, is clearly "aware" of a rule which substitutes the diphthong [ə^l] for a syllabic [r] in New York City speech. It seems extremely unlikely, in the face of the variety of words in the above little poem and in other instantiations of this rule we have in our data, that this is a lexical (hence referential) rule.

We have strayed, however, from our explication of Silverstein's probabilistic conditions for folk awareness, and we return to that list and reserve for later comment the levels and types of awareness which play a role in the folk characterization of language.

2. The second of Silverstein's requirements is "continuous segmentability." Linguistic units which the folk are most likely to be aware of are not interrupted by other material. In "I am going to town," the entire sentence, each word, phrases such as *to town*, and even inseparable morphemes such as *-ing* are all continuously segmentable. The form which refers to the progressive aspect, however, is *am -ing* (or, more abstractly, *be -ing*) and always displays discontinuity in English (Silverstein 1981:6).

In our data, however, in a rather lengthy discussion of the passive, an equally discontinuous phenomenon (i.e., *be + -en*), several respondents provide evidence for considerable folk awareness (5.3.2). That the speakers involved are well-educated does not, as we have already stated, deter us from describing the data gleaned from this interaction (and others like it) as folk linguistics. Subject-verb agreement (a clearly discontinuous dependency) and split infinitives are also frequently discussed phenomena, but, like the non-referential items discussed above, they all seem to qualify as exceptions to Silverstein's rules on the basis of their status as linguistic stereotypes, further evidence, perhaps, of the dominating concern of prescription (and proscription) in folk comment.

3. "Relative presuppositionality" refers to the degree to which a pragmatic function of language depends on other factors to realize its meaning. The higher the relative presuppositionality, the greater the chance for folk awareness. At the high end of this scale are such items as *this* and *that*, which successfully function only if there is a physical reality to which they can be linked, a relative physical (or metaphoric mental) distance which supports the choice between them, or a prior mention of some entity (Silverstein 1981:7). It is important not to confuse this strict dependency which is a feature of items with high relative presuppositionality with the more general notion of context sensitivity. An item like *here*, with very high relative presuppositionality, is, in fact, not very context sensitive, neither to the surrounding linguistic nor nonlinguistic context. *Here* means the same thing in a wide variety of tense-aspect configurations ("He's on his way here"; "I've been here before") and in a church or in a saloon.

At the other end of the scale, phonological matters have no dependency on a specific element in the surrounding linguistic or nonlinguistic world. A nonprevocalic /r/, for example, is always just a

nonprevocalic /r/. Nothing like “a locus” (necessary for *here*) or “previous mention of a female person” (necessary for *she*) provides “meaning” to nonprevocalic /r/.

Although there is considerable evidence that the folk are aware of the sort of creative pragmatic marking made by speakers who use more or less of one form or another, even at the level of phonology (where relative presuppositionality is lowest), it is also the case that such awareness, as we have already suggested, appears to develop from associated attitudes about speakers, attitudes which make stereotypes out of linguistic elements. The same might be said of lower-level grammatical features (e.g., agreement) whose referentiality is low, particularly in a language such as English.

4. “Decontextualized deducibility” refers to those linguistic items which can be given a ready meaning by folk respondents without extensive reference to context. Here Silverstein apparently means to refer to the general sort of context excluded from the strict dependencies described in 3) immediately above. The more elaborate the context one needs to differentiate an opposition or pragmatic contrast, the less likely it will be available to folk awareness. Nevertheless, Silverstein claims that when the folk comment on linguistic objects, they tend to specify the “deducible entailed presuppositions,” which, he says, is the equivalent of stating the meaning. In other words, providing the contexts in which the use of the form in question fits or is true is a common folk linguistic activity (Silverstein 1981:13-4).

We encounter this approach often among the folk, particularly in discussions of the meaning of words. The fit between increasingly specified contexts and the conditions under which the word can be said to belong is a ploy explicitly remarked on by D in the following:

[In a discussion of Christmas customs, H (the fieldworker) has asked if there is any difference between *gift* and *present*; D has said earlier there is not, but he returns to the question.]

D: Oftentimes a gift is something like you you go to a Tupperware party and they're going to give you a gift, it's- I think it's more=

H: [Uh huh.

D: =impersonal, - than a present.

G: [No, there's no difference.

D: [No? There's real- yeah there's really no difference.

[

- G: There is no difference.
 D: That's true. Maybe the way we use it is though.
 U: Maybe we could look it up and see what "gift" means.
 D: [I mean technically
 there's no difference. (#28)
 ((They then look up *gift* and *present* in the dictionary.))

D's distinction between "technical" meaning¹⁰ and "use" points in the direction of "decontextualized deducibility"; that is, although he feels the words mean the same at some definitional level which is open to expert knowledge, the fit of the words into different contexts may reveal distinctions. After some time passes in the conversation, he comes up with an appropriate frame:

- D: In advertising sometimes they'll say: you know, "We have a gift for you." Or- or something.
 H: [Yes, yes.
 H: But they don't use "present."
 D: Um: - I don't think as much. (#28)

D goes on to say that his bank offers a *gift* if one opens an account; *present* would be unlikely in that context. The finely-tuned characterization of meaning is determined through the folk activity of matching the item to those contexts which meet the required characteristics.

5. Finally, "metapragmatic transparency." When the folk characterize what went on, they are more likely to reproduce exactly what was said only if the performance was a "metapragmatically transparent" one. Suppose that Wanda is cold and that Karla is near the thermostat. Wanda has a number of options:

- Brrrrrrrr!
 I'm freezing.
 Aren't you cold? I wonder if the furnace is broken?
 Would you mind if we had a little more heat in here?
 Turn up the heat.
 etc.

"Turn up the heat" has the greatest metapragmatic transparency. Accounts of the interaction between Wanda and Karla are more likely to result in an observation that "Wanda asked Karla to turn up the heat" than in an embedding of any of the other request forms. ("Wanda said 'Aren't you cold?' and by that meant for Karla to turn

up the heat” would be a strange folk report.) In other words, folk awareness seems to focus on direct rather than indirect speech acts.

Although we have little occasion in our data to observe such translated reports of speech activities, we do have evidence of folk awareness of indirection. In one case the fieldworker relates a story of a foreign student’s cool reception at the home of a US student who had asked her to “Come and see me sometime.” A respondent tells the fieldworker that “Yeah, sometimes what is necessarily SAID, is not – what is actually meant.” (G, #36a)

Except for these occasional counterexamples, however, we agree in general with Silverstein’s generalizations about those cognitive and linguistic aspects of language which are likely to hinder or advance accessibility. We believe, as we have already hinted, however, that nearly all of them can be overcome (or exaggerated) by factors yet to be discussed. We do not discuss here, however, other (“nonlinguistic”) concerns which may influence accessibility: memory, attentiveness, and other such cognitive factors and their correlation with both simple (e.g., part of speech, linguistic level) and complex (e.g., “transformational complexity”) linguistic factors. Doubtless these are important matters, and they deserve attention (Preston 1996).

1.1.2.1 Communicative primacy. We add to these considerations of Silverstein’s a more general account of the accuracy of folk report, for we believe that the straight path from linguistic facts (of any sort, at any level) to folk report is a very rocky one, impeded by the nature of communication itself. If attitudinal factors (i.e., the sorts of social prejudices which create linguistic stereotypes) do not intervene to foreground some structural element, such elements appear to be overwhelmingly subservient to communicative function.

In several years of training transcribers of conversation, one of the authors has offered prizes (within the severe limits of a professorial salary, of course) to students who can provide two pages of error-free double-spaced transcription. Everything is loaded in favor of the students’ winning. Most are linguists in training; they are informed of the prize before the work; and error-free is generously defined. (Noisy sections of tape or disputable interpretations are not used to discredit a transcription, and the students themselves are used as judges.) No one has yet claimed the prize.

How can linguists whose focus is on form (and who are teased with reward) err so badly? An inspection of typical mistakes shows that even multiple listenings by linguistically sophisticated transcribers miss (or supply) facts; they are not detected because the commu-

nicative (propositional) core of the language event flows freely. “I said that he left” may be listened to many times and still appear in a transcript as “I said he left” (or vice versa). “Bill took the dog out for a walk” might be rendered as “Bill took the dog for a walk” (or vice versa). In every case, the report is informationally accurate, but the details are off.

The students are always amazed at their silly mistakes, but the point is straightforward. Even settings which focus on the details of form may be subverted by the fulfillment of the communicative function. This communicative power may be so great as to submerge apparently glaring differences. One of the authors once told a new acquaintance (a Slavic linguist with no information about United States varieties) that he was from northwestern Ohio. The amazed Slavist allowed that that was so, and wanted to know the arcanities on which the identification was based. One of the telling facts was his use of such constructions as “My shoes need shined” (opposed to the more widely distributed “My shoes need to be shined” or “My shoes need shining.”) Linguist though he was, he had never noticed that his structure differed. (In fact, he went away to check and returned shattered, for he was a prescriptivist, to find that many speakers of United States English found his construction weird, non-native, and the like; we return to those observations in a moment.) It is important to note that the linguist under discussion is from a section of the United States known in regional dialectology as the “North Midland,” an area little caricatured, perhaps even the seat of the fictional home of Standard American English (where national radio and television announcers and newsmen are supposed to come from.) It is an area of high linguistic security, so our linguist would have little reason to believe that anything he did was out of the ordinary (see Chapter 2.1.1.2 below). His inaccurate first response, then, on being told this construction was used to identify his regional speech, was that “Everyone says that.” Since his own performance, distinct as it was, awakened no caricatures of region or status, he simply translated the performance of all speakers of educated varieties into his own. Given that he had only negative evidence to go on (in his adult life, surrounding speakers did not use the construction), it is not surprising that he emerged from graduate school (in an area where the construction is not used), worked overseas (with a considerable variety of English speakers), and reached his thirties before he became aware of the “oddness” of his construction.

It is important to notice, however, that even our linguist’s positive evidence (his use of the odd construction) apparently awakened

no comment in years of contact with non-users. Recall that he is a North Midland speaker; his phonology awakens no caricatures, and his auditors simply could not believe, therefore, that his syntax could be so strange. That is, they must have assumed that what he said was normal, partly overcome by the rest of his unremarkable performance, partly by the overwhelming communicative function of interaction, and partly, doubtless, by his status.

In short, we believe that the communicative function of language (in caricature-free environments) is so strong that it overcomes the ability to give an accurate report of performance whether of self or of others and whether of general or restricted phenomena. The inaccuracy of self and other report when person stereotypes are engaged is well-known – near-southerners claim there is nothing southern about their speech; speakers of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) claim not to know it, etc.¹¹

1.1.2.2 Prescription. We shall go further here in distinguishing what the folk perceive as even the proper content of observations about language itself. Nonlinguists use prescription (at nearly every linguistic level) in description; linguists, on the other hand, find the sources for prescription in power, esteem, tradition, and the like, not in the underlying nature of language itself. In other words, for linguists some language facts acquire special status due to their association with certain segments of society. To be sure the folk associate language facts and social groups, but they reject the cause-and-effect relationship: good language is not good just because it is (and has been) used by good speakers. Good language for the folk is a much greater abstraction; it is good because it is logical, clear, continuous (in an etymological sense), and so on. For the folk this notion of good language extends itself even to the boundaries of what the language is or may contain. What is not a part of that logical, continuous entity is not really language at all. (“*Ain’t* ain’t a word, is it?”) Appeals to the dictionary and grammar books are, therefore, not really appeals to trusted authorities on usage; they are appeals to pundits and sages who have insight into the Platonic abstraction that is the language. If these guardians of the public linguistic trust fail in their responsibility to provide access to the abstraction by, for example, basing their work on usage, they may be open to public outcry.¹²

Recall that D (#28, cited above) contrasts “the way we use it” with “technically” in determining the difference between *gift* and *present*. Many linguists will find this naive, for “the way we use it” is the determiner of the sense. D, like other folk linguists, however, knows that there is an abstract reality (one only glimpsed in diction-

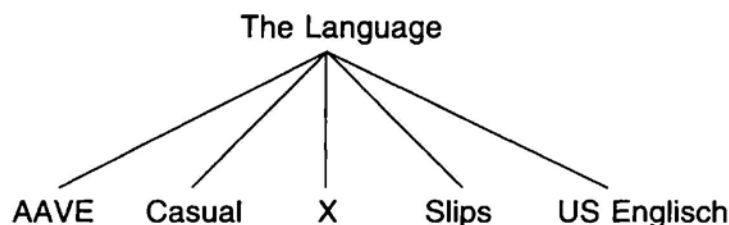
aries and grammars) in which, apparently, these two words mean the same thing, and that this abstraction lurks behind use. The introductory linguistics battle against prescriptivism is often seen as a social or human contest, one which tries to instill linguistic relativism by defeating folk beliefs about the language of the poor or marginalized. There is a deeper philosophical position involved in the confusion of prescription and description, however. For the folk, social stratification provides only another exemplification of the distribution of goods in a society; it is not the source of the shape of the goods themselves. A real language exists in folk belief, and even enfranchised speakers themselves may stray from it for any number of reasons.

What many folk linguists have to say about the nature of language will, therefore, appear to professional linguists to be filtered through reactive, attitudinal factors. Folk observations, however, may often reflect only the difference between a belief in a technical abstraction (the language itself) and what is actually done – the latter, in the folk mind, of apparently little interest to language professionals.

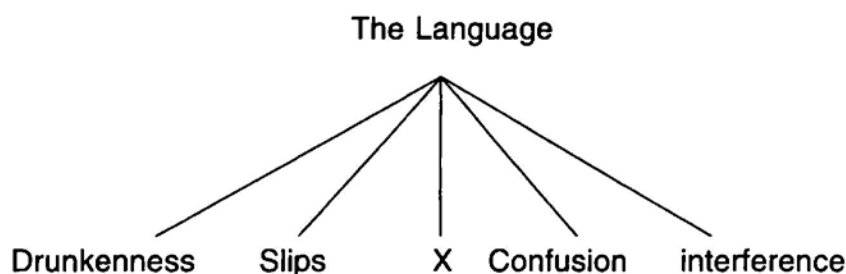
It is important to note that this philosophical (or Platonic) prescriptivism¹³ is not the outpouring of an overactive linguistic insecurity. The area where this research was done has no such self-image (e.g., Preston 1989a and 2.1 below), and many of the respondents in this survey felt no such linguistic embarrassment.

Figure 1.2 contrasts a folk versus linguistic taxonomy of some of these issues. Many linguists agree that although such phenomena as drunken speech, interference from other systems, and slips of the tongue may be interesting, they need to be edited out in constructing a grammar of a language, which leads back to the guiding cognitive principles on which it is constructed. The X in the linguistic taxonomy is, therefore, a perfect reflection of the language, the performance which reflects the competence of Chomsky's famous ideal native speaker-hearer:

Of course, it is understood that speech communities in the Bloomfieldian sense – that is, collections of individuals with the same speech behavior – do not exist in the real world. Each individual has acquired a language in the course of complex social interactions with people who vary in the ways in which they speak and interpret what they hear and in the internal representations that underlie their use of language. ... We abstract from these facts ..., considering only the case of a person presented with uniform experience in an ideal Bloomfieldian speech community with no dialect diversity and no variation among speakers. (Chomsky 1986:16-7)



a. A folk taxonomy of competence and performance



b. A linguistic taxonomy of competence and performance

Figure 1.2 Folk (a.) and linguistic (b.) taxonomies (partial) of “competence” and “performance”

In terms of Figure 1.2b, it is at the level “The Language” itself where dialectal, stylistic, and even individual diversity are edited out for the linguist. “The Language” is a cognitive, internal reality of an individual speaker, and linguists often pretend, for the sake of science, that a mass of linguistic clones exists.¹⁴ To show all the concerns of the folk taxonomy in a linguistic one, we would have to show a much grander scheme – Figure 1.3. In an attempt to get to the principles of human language, many linguists cut through the mass of diversity in Figure 1.3 and simply pretend that the individual performance isolated at X is the performance of an ideal Bloomfieldian speech community. Figure 1.3 shows that the difference between the folk and linguistic taxonomies of Figure 1.2 is more radical than it first appears. Linguists have created an agreed-on abstraction (“The Language”) by pretending that there is a group of error-free, monodialectal, monostylistic speakers. They know that such a group does not