

# Dialect and dialects in the new Europe : leçon inaugurale prononcée en mai 1994

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne**

Band (Jahr): - **(1997)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **14.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870419>

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## DIALECT AND DIALECTS IN THE NEW EUROPE

Leçon inaugurale prononcée en mai 1994

The theme with which I am going to deal is respect – or rather, sadly, lack of respect — for language and for varieties of language. The regrettable truth for those of us who work in linguistics is that, in spite of a century or more of scientific research in linguistics, there is still in the world as a whole, and perhaps especially in Europe, a lack of respect for language. Even more sadly, this lack of respect for language and languages in our continent seems to be most prevalent where one would expect it least : amongst certain members of the intelligentsia, the literati, the journalists, the politicians, the opinion-makers. Of course, they pay lip-service to language. They value great literature. They abhor illiteracy. They are fanatical about the preservation of what they call « standards » in speaking and writing. They support the fallacy that appears everywhere in every generation that their own language, whatever it is, is in decline — that the young do not write or speak as well as the old.

But a closer examination shows that what respect they have for language is confined to varieties of language spoken by a very small proportion of the population of this continent. The only languages which they deem worthy of respect, and which they recognise as valid, are the major European languages — those with millions of speakers. And the only varieties of those languages which they respect are the standard, written varieties. In other words, we are presented with a phenomenon, amongst our European intelligentsia, which we can call « denigration of vernacular varieties ». That is, there is a widespread view in our European countries that some varieties of language are somehow more worthy, more valid, in some mysterious way simply better than others.

Linguists know that this view is wrong, worse — pernicious. But we, as experts on language, ought to do more to combat it than we currently do because it has disastrous consequences. What sort of disastrous consequences am I thinking about? Well, for example, linguists are often asked: How many languages are there in the world? (The answer is, perhaps, about 5,000.) One thing we can be very sure about, however, is that whatever the total number of languages in the world may be, it is less than it used to be, and it is getting smaller all the time. In these last years of the 20th century, languages are dying out, without being replaced, at an increasingly catastrophic rate. A consideration of language death in the 1990s, in the world as a whole, shows that very many even well-known languages are under more or less severe threat of extinction.

In Europe, a number of languages have been lost in relatively recent times: Cornish, Dalmatian, Livonian, Manx. Many more have to be considered to be currently in a precarious situation: Irish, Scots Gaelic, Breton, North Frisian, East Frisian, Sami/Lappish, Sorbian, Kashubian, Ladin, and here in Switzerland, Romansch — to name but some. Happily, in recent years linguists have become more and more aware of this problem. Sociolinguists such as Joshua Fishman, with his important work on reversing language shift, have actually been trying to do something about it. Linguists in many parts of the world, including Europe, are trying to help smaller, threatened communities to transmit their languages to the next generation. In the current intellectual climate, however, this may well not be enough. The denigration of vernacular varieties leads many communities to believe that their languages are not worth preserving.

Here, however, I want to concentrate on a related but broader phenomenon. The rapid disappearance of languages from the world is part of a wider phenomenon of linguistic homogenisation. Linguistic homogenisation in Europe takes two rather different forms. First, we notice that there are in Europe a large number of cases where, although the global death of a language is not involved, language varieties are under threat in locations where they are minority languages. French, for example, is not dying out in general, but it is dying out in Italy. German is not dying out, but it is dying out in France, Italy, Denmark and Romania, etc. Catalan is not dying out in Catalonia or Andorra, but it is dying out in France. Dutch is dying out in France,

Turkish is dying out in Bulgaria; Bulgarian is dying out in Greece; Greek is dying out in Turkey — and so on and so on.

Secondly, in most parts of Europe — although not everywhere, as I shall mention again later on — we are also witnessing a phenomenon that we can call dialect death. We are seeing less and less regional variation in language, less and less dialect variation, the loss of patois/traditional dialects, increasing standardisation, increasing homogenisation. In both cases, I believe that the intellectual position I have called denigration of vernacular varieties plays a role.

Now, an obvious and important question suggests itself at this point — and it is a question which, quite understandably, is often asked by non-linguists. The question is: So what? Do these processes matter? Why should we worry if most of the languages and dialects of the world disappear? Specifically, does it matter if Europe becomes linguistically more homogeneous?

This is a question that linguists should be prepared to answer as often as possible, and as publicly as possible. No one else will do it for us, and many non-linguists are quite understandably unaware, unconcerned, misinformed or even hostile about the issues involved. A frequent, non-linguistic view of language and dialect diversity is that languages are a problem and dialects are a nuisance. The existence of many languages in the world is widely perceived as simply posing difficulties for communication. The curse of the Tower of Babel is seen as hampering understanding and slowing down progress to world peace. In the European context, minority languages and dialects are regarded as impeding communication, delaying modernisation, damaging education, and slowing down nation-building. To argue for the desirability of the preservation of linguistic diversity is therefore no easy matter.

This is not the place to answer this «so what?» question fully or satisfactorily. However, arguments that would naturally occur to linguists would, I suggest, include the following. Firstly, barriers to communication are not necessarily a bad thing, especially insofar as they aid the preservation of individual human cultures and communities. Secondly, the connection between language and culture is a very intimate one, and the loss of languages and dialects can readily lead to the disappearance of cultures. Thirdly, different languages and dialects encapsulate and reflect different world views — different ways of analysing and interpreting the world. The disappearance of languages and dialects would lead to the disappearance of these world views. Finally, if we are to

achieve a better understanding than we currently have of the uniquely human faculty of language, we need to know as much as we can about as many languages and dialects as possible.

For example, until the 1970s linguists knew that languages were of 4 major types. First, there were those in which the typical word-order of a sentence was subject-verb-object, as in French or English, where we say *The man drank some beer*. Secondly, there were languages such as Latin where the word-order was subject-object-verb: *The man some beer drank*. Thirdly, there were languages like Welsh where the order was verb-subject-object: *Drank the man some beer*. And there were also some verb-object-subject languages: *Drank some beer the man*. But we knew that, interestingly, there were no object-initial languages — no languages with the order object-subject-verb or object-verb-subject. Naturally, as a scientist, when you know such a thing, you try and explain it. You develop hypotheses and theories about why object-initial languages do not exist — theories about human perception, the processing of information, the interaction of discourse structure and brain structure. Then, in the 1970s, we discovered that our theories were useless because we were wrong. In the Amazon jungle, on the borders of Brazil and Guyana, a group of languages was discovered which were object-initial. These languages are spoken by small groups of Amerindian speakers and, sadly, may not survive long into the 21st century. If these languages had died out before they came to the attention of linguists, we would never have known that the human brain, and human societies, were capable of producing languages where it is normal to say: *Some beer drinks the man*.

All these arguments apply equally to language death and dialect death. There are, however, specific reasons in the European context to feel particularly anxious about the effects of dialect death. (This is especially so since there are many people who might care a lot about language death but couldn't care less about dialect death. In certain countries, as I have already said, the intelligentsia are actively in favour dialect death.) It may not be immediately obvious that dialects are just as intimately linked to cultures as are languages. But just as there are national cultures, so there are local cultures, and dialects symbolise these local cultures, maintain them, defend them. Indeed, in the new Europe, it is possible to argue that, at least in some cases, local identities as symbolised by dialects are actually more desirable than national identities as symbolised by standard languages. In some situa-

tions, regional dialects, by reinforcing local cultures and local identities, may act as a counter to nationalism. To argue in this way, of course, represents the linguistic counterpart to the political argument that is often heard in connection with the European Community, namely that the increasing importance of the community will make the individual nation-states less important, which will in turn give greater importance to the regions.

It is also necessary to point out to those intellectuals who despise regional dialects that dialect death and standardisation can actually cause rather than solve communication problems. This is particularly likely to be the case where, as in many parts of Europe, you find a geographical continuum of dialects. A geographical dialect continuum is a situation where you find that the local dialects spoken in each area change gradually, from place to place, in such a way that the differences between them are cumulative. This has the result that while each dialect is readily mutually intelligible with with next, dialects at either end of the continuum may not be mutually intelligible. Thus, the dialects of the north of Norway are not mutually intelligible with the dialects of southern Denmark, but they are connected by a chain of mutual intelligibility — there is no geographical point anywhere within Scandinavia where there is a clear break between one dialect and another. You find the same situation in Italy, within the Iberian peninsula, within the Slavic languages of the Balkan peninsula, and many other places in Europe.

Take, for example, the border between The Netherlands and Germany. Linguists will tell you that this is a border without an isogloss — that is, a border without a dialect boundary. Speakers on either side of the border speak dialects which are the same or very similar. This has meant that for generations there has been ready and easy cross-border communication, as there continues to be today. Working-class Dutch people from Nijmegen, for example, travel across the border to the German town of Cleves to visit, to shop, and to work — something which the EC has made much easier. Working-class Germans travel in the opposite direction. Notice, however, that just as the new Europe is breaking down barriers to cross-border travel and employment, middle-class Dutch and German people from Nijmegen and Cleves are no longer able to participate so readily in this cross-border traffic. Why not? Because they can no longer speak the local dialect. If middle-class Dutch people who can only speak Standard Dutch want to travel to work in Germany, they have to study and learn

Standard German because the people of Cleves cannot understand Standard Dutch. Many of them, of course, have done so. Many fewer Germans, however, have learnt Standard Dutch. The dialect continuum which permitted easy communication has, at least for middle-class speakers, been cut and broken by standardisation.

Similar developments are occurring in Scandinavia. Because regional dialects are dying out in Sweden and Denmark, younger people have less exposure to language variety, less ability, and probably less desire, to try to understand other language varieties — hence the growing practice even in internationally-minded Scandinavia of subtitling programmes on television where previously none would have been thought necessary. Indeed, not only are the Danes these days subtitling TV programmes in Swedish dialects, they are even doing it for programmes in Danish dialects!

I hope the connection between language death and dialect death, on the one hand, and the denigration of vernacular varieties, on the other, is clear. If we wish to maintain linguistic diversity and oppose linguistic homogenisation, we have to consider speakers' attitudes to their own languages and dialects. Of course, we have to do other things as well. As far as language death in minority communities is concerned, we have to work for the preservation of traditional modes of transmission from generation to generation, the maintenance of linguistically viable communities of children, and the introduction of incentives for young people to use the language in question, as is being done in Switzerland with Romansch, and with the North Frisian-speaking communities of Schleswig-Holstein, for example. Most importantly, however, linguists are in an especially powerful position to support language maintenance by engendering positive ideas about languages on the part of their speakers. No amount of official support in the world will save a minority language if speakers continue to have negative ideas about it, as the current sorry state of the Irish language so tragically illustrates.

Minority-language speakers acquire majority languages or metropolitan languages or national languages for very obvious, valid, functional reasons. But acquiring second and third languages is not the same thing as losing your first language. Speakers often abandon their native languages because they are ashamed of them. And this of course is not surprising if they have been told by powerful and influential people that they ought to be ashamed. For instance, in Alsace, German speakers who admire

and respect the German language may nevertheless give up speaking German and shift completely to French if they believe that the way they themselves speak German is not admirable or worthy of respect. Obviously, linguists, as experts on language, are in a good position to counteract this kind of belief by stating publicly, loudly and frequently that, as all linguists are agreed, all languages and dialects are equally complex, valid, adequate, structured systems. They are all equally miraculous products of the human brain, and we can be equally proud of all of them, whatever their social status.

Linguists can say this kind of thing because, as we should not be ashamed to assert, we are authorities on language. We are the experts. Now, of course, I freely admit that persuading everybody else that we are experts is not easy. We have the same problem as other human scientists. People who are happy to accept as true what chemists, physicists or biologists say are much less willing to accept the word of sociologists or psychologists or linguists. The problem for linguists is that even non-linguists speak at least one language, and therefore think they are experts also. A recent committee set up by the British government to look at English teaching in schools consisted of politicians, industrialists, TV personalities, famous novelists, with only token representation from linguists. You will understand that what I am saying is that we not only have to earn respect for language, but also for linguistic science itself.

As far as dialect death is concerned, we have to acknowledge that much dialect loss in modern Europe is due to processes which are probably sociolinguistically inevitable. Increased geographical mobility and urbanisation lead to contact between dialects and thus dialect-levelling and koinéisation. There is nothing we can or would wish to do about that. What we can work against is that kind of dialect loss which is the result of attitudinal factors. In most European countries, the majority of the population that does not speak the standard variety is discriminated against in various ways, and made to feel that their native vernacular dialects are inferior, not only socially, which is unfortunately true, but also linguistically, which is most emphatically not true. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if many of them try to shift to the standard variety even if, at some level of consciousness, they do not really want to.

In this kind of atmosphere, traditional dialects or patois can disappear surprisingly quickly. Traditional dialects have more or



less disappeared from most of England, for example — although not from Scotland — and in many parts of the French-speaking world the picture is the same, including here in the Canton of Vaud. Up until the 18th century, the situation here was as described by Gaston Tuailleon : « Le patois est la langue des jours de semaine, et le français la langue du dimanche ». Subsequently, however, there was, in the 19th century, a deliberate policy of exterminating the patois. The rapidity with which the patois died out in many, although not all, parts of western Switzerland was discussed some years ago in the *Tagesanzeiger* under the dramatic but accurate heading « Direkte Erben des Spätlateins sterben aus ». It went on to say : « Wer denkt schon daran, dass bis Mitte des letzten Jahrhunderts die Mehrheit der Westschweizer nicht Französisch, sondern Mundart oder Patois zur Muttersprache hatte ? Mundart war die Umgangssprache ; Französisch lernte man in der Schule. In nur anderthalb Jahrhunderten gerieten aber die gallorömischen Dialekte in der Westschweiz praktisch ausser Gebrauch ». One hundred and fifty years was all it took — and in some parts of Europe, dialect death seems to be taking place even more quickly than that. There is often, of course, a direct relationship between the degree of hostility to dialects, the amount of denigration of vernacular varieties, and the rate at which they disappear.

One way of combating this hostility is to point to those fortunate, more tolerant societies which do have greater respect for language varieties as good examples to be followed. In many dialect-hostile parts of Europe, including England, there is a widespread view that dialects are out-of-date, old-fashioned, unsophisticated, divisive, economically disadvantageous. To combat this belief, we can point to the following very interesting fact. In 1990, according to many measurements of per capita income, the 3 richest countries in Europe were Luxemburg, Norway and Switzerland. What can we say about the linguistic situations in those countries ?

Firstly, we can point out that the entire indigenous population of Luxemburg is dialect-speaking. They learn and use German, they learn and use French, but their mother-tongue is Luxemburgish/ Letzeburgisch, which is widely regarded as a dialect of German.

Secondly, we can point out that Norway is also one of the most dialect-speaking countries in Europe. Some people do speak Standard Norwegian, but the majority do not, whatever the social

situation. People speak dialect on radio and TV, professors give lectures in dialect, and authors write poems and novels in dialect. The most important aspect of the Norwegian language situation, however, is that there is an enormous societal tolerance for linguistic diversity and that, what is more, linguistic diversity in Norway is officially recognised and officially protected. This is most clearly illustrated by the fact that there is in Norway a law which states that teachers are not allowed to try to change the way children speak in the classroom. If, as most of them do, children come into school speaking dialect, they must be allowed to continue to do so. (I cannot but help notice the unfortunate contrast with my own country: the current British Minister of Education has announced that all children should be able to speak Standard English, and there even appears to be the possibility that the government will require the testing of children in schools on their ability to do so from the age of 7, although this is not clear as yet.) The other important aspect of the language situation in Norway is that there are two different forms of Standard Norwegian, and that both these Standards permit internal variation. This means that many more people than in other countries can learn to write in a form of Norwegian which quite closely resembles their own dialect and still be writing an officially recognised Standard Norwegian. This notion of a variable standard obviously increases respect for variety in language, and could provide a valuable model for language planners elsewhere in Europe.

Norway is also of considerable interest, when it comes to attacking the denigration of vernacular varieties, in that lower social-class dialect forms have quite deliberately been introduced into the Norwegian standard languages. Standard languages, that is, do not necessarily have to be elitist. Contrast this with what has happened in other countries. Just when, in the 20th century, literacy in Europe was supposed to become universal, we have moved the goal-posts, by making literacy dependent on the acquisition of standard varieties based on upper-class social dialects, and thus more difficult for most people to acquire. You may be able to write, but unless you can write the upper-class standard variety, it doesn't count.

Thirdly, we come to Switzerland. Switzerland is well-known for its multilingualism and for its official and reasonably successful protection of four different language communities. For my purposes, however, the most interesting thing about Switzerland

is that the majority of its inhabitants are dialect-speaking. In the so-called German speaking area of the country, all the indigenous inhabitants are dialect speakers. I am struck by the fact that there are some people in Switzerland who appear to believe that this degree of dialect-speaking is a bad thing. For instance, M. Jean Cavadini was quoted in *L'Hebdo* — in an excellent series of articles on the Swiss dialect situation — as saying : « Les Suisses allemands doivent faire l'effort de passer à une pratique courante de l'allemand, en confinant le dialecte à certains usages domestiques, car la voie du dialecte systématique est une voie sans issue ».

It seems to me, on the contrary, that these richest of European countries, Switzerland, Norway and Luxemburg, are paradigm examples of extremely desirable sociolinguistic situations that the rest of us would do very well to imitate (although I acknowledge of course that every case is different, and that what is possible in one language situation may not be possible in another — for example, these models would be difficult to follow in Italy, where not all dialects are mutually intelligible). Indeed, these three countries follow much more closely than most other European countries the UNESCO recommendation that children should be educated in three languages : their own native language ; a national language ; and an international language. In German-speaking Switzerland, for instance, people typically learn French and English and/or Italian. They have kept their own local Swiss German dialects, which they quite rightly preserve and nurture. And they have chosen, in a very internationally-minded way — as have the Luxemburgers also — to learn and use as their written standard language a foreign language, German, which can be used as a vehicle of both intranational and international communication.

Notice the enormous democratic advantage of using a related but external language as the standard in this way. In Norway, equality is achieved and discrimination avoided by employing a flexible standard variety. In Switzerland, the same result is achieved by the use of Standard German as the written variety, which has the profoundly democratic and egalitarian effect of putting everybody at an equal disadvantage. This is not unlike the situation in India, where attempts to use Hindi as the national language have been relatively unsuccessful because this favours native Hindi-speakers and disadvantages everyone else. The use of English, on the other hand, puts all language groups in India at

an equal disadvantage and has thus, in actual practice, been favoured.

It would be too much to claim, of course, that Luxemburg, Norway and Switzerland are rich *because* they are dialect-speaking. But I also think that we should not underestimate the degree of alienation that occurs in situations where people are denied the dignity of having respect accorded to their vernacular speech. Nor should we underestimate the advantages of having a population able to express itself fluently and clearly in its own vernacular, without having to monitor the extent to which they are speaking «correctly» or not.

In Britain, on the other hand, we have an inflexible standard language historically based on upper-class dialects, which disadvantages everyone except the elite, and a population the majority of whom are persuaded that they cannot speak English «correctly». It is true that in the 1970s and 1980s, linguists and educationists had considerable success in persuading teachers that Standard English is not linguistically superior to other dialects of English, and that children should be taught to use Standard English, especially in writing, *in addition* to their native dialects, not *instead* of them. Sadly, we have now learnt that this is a battle that has to be fought again in every generation. Unfortunately, we can now expect the elitist language situation in Britain to get worse, as a result of the new requirement which I mentioned earlier that children will be instructed to use, and perhaps also rewarded for using, spoken Standard English. This will immediately give an educational advantage to the upper-class and middle-class minority of children — probably only 12-15% — who come into school already being native-speakers of Standard English. The government has frequently overruled the advice of the educationists and linguists they have employed as consultants on this point. Some of the supporters of this requirement, however, do appear to be people of good will who are acting in good faith but on the seriously mistaken assumption that dialects are made up of a series of «errors», and that Standard English is somehow endowed with greater «correctness» or «clarity» or «adequacy». It is the job of linguists, I would argue, to persuade such people that all dialects are structured, grammatical systems of equal correctness, clarity and adequacy.

It is not only in Britain, however, that we find that this myth is widely accepted — that dialects are «inadequate» for certain tasks — that they cannot be used for educational or intellectual

purposes. Here, again, the Swiss German situation shows that nothing could be further from the truth. Of course, if you are to discuss a particular subject adequately, you need to be in command of the vocabulary associated with that subject. But it is obvious that there is no necessary connection between dialect and vocabulary. This becomes extremely clear if, for example, you hear two Swiss German professors discussing, say, the work of Heidegger using, of course, all the appropriate philosophical vocabulary, but employing also Swiss German dialect pronunciation and grammar. The same phenomenon occurs in Norway.

There are also in Britain people who defend the new spoken Standard English requirement by arguing that those who are not able to speak Standard English are at an educational and occupational disadvantage. This is sad but true. This is why people who wish to become bidialectal must be given the opportunity to improve their chances in this way. However, this is not the same thing at all as arguing that everyone should at all times and in all places speak the same standard variety.

Besides, there is an obvious moral issue here concerning the human rights of dialect speakers. If individuals suffer discrimination as a result of racism, we do not suggest that they change their race, although of course in places such as the United States there was a long and sad history of Black people doing their best to look as much like White people as possible. If individuals suffer discrimination as a result of sexism, we do not suggest they change sex, although of course there are celebrated cases in history of women pretending to be men for various reasons. If individuals suffer discrimination because of the dialects they speak, then it is the discrimination that should be stamped out, not the dialects, although of course we cannot blame people if, in the meantime, they try to protect themselves against discrimination by acquiring another dialect.

It is my thesis, then, that the intellectual position that I have labelled «denigration of vernacular varieties» is leading in Europe to increasing linguistic homogenisation as speakers abandon their minority languages and nonstandard dialects because of the discrimination they suffer, and because of the negative attitudes they have acquired towards these language varieties. I am also suggesting that linguists are in a particularly strong position to oppose this homogenisation because they, as experts on language, have the knowledge and ability to engender positive attitudes and to counter the denigration.

Sometimes, however, it will be necessary for linguists to be rather technical in their argumentation. Take, for example, a particular form of denigration which is often aimed at unwritten and/or minority languages in certain parts of Europe, which takes the form of attacking such languages by claiming that they are not languages at all but «just dialects». If we are to oppose such denigration, we need to understand that this is a form of attack which is typically aimed only at minority languages which have the sociolinguistic status of Ausbau languages. This German word for «extension» is used as a technical term in sociolinguistics to refer to varieties of language that form part of a geographical continuum of dialects but which have acquired the status of separate, individual languages for historical, political and cultural reasons, like Dutch and German, or Swedish and Norwegian. For example, under the Franco dictatorship in Spain, not even Franco was able to claim that Basque was a dialect of Spanish, because Basque is not an Ausbau language but rather an Abstand or «distance» language — a separate language by reason of its linguistic distance from all other languages. But this is what happened to Catalan, in effect. Because Catalan has an Ausbau relationship to Spanish — because they are both on the same continuum of dialects — its status as a language rather than a dialect could be attacked, by the centralising government, by the removal of its symbols of linguistic autonomy: professorial Chairs of Catalan language and literature, newspapers, books, radio broadcasts in Catalan, and so on. The implication was that Catalan was, after all, just a dialect of Spanish.

Paradoxically, in certain other situations, we can see attacks on language varieties taking the opposite form — of claiming that a dialect is really a language. Greek, for instance, is a good example of an Abstand language — it has no close relatives, and it is not part of a continuum of dialects which includes other languages. Minority languages in Greece, of which there are five or six, are therefore in no danger of being classified as «just dialects of Greek». Notice what does happen, however. For example, members of the Albanian-speaking minority in Greece have long been persuaded, not that their language is really Greek — that would have been absurd — but that their language is not Albanian! In Greece, it goes by a different name — Arvanitika — and has, by implication, no connection with Albanian or Albania. Albanian has a long literary tradition, and the respect normally

accorded to a national language. «Arvanitika», which is not a written language in Greece, is naturally denied this respect.

It is important, I think, for this kind of issue to be better understood by a wider public, because language problems of this Ausbau type are likely to be a big issue in the new Europe. Consider the following innocent-sounding but potentially very dangerous questions: Are Serbian and Croatian one language or two? If there is no such language as Serbo-Croat, what language do Bosnian Moslems speak? Is there such a language as Macedonian? Are Rumanian and Moldavian the same language or not? Nearer home, and I hope less dangerously: is Swiss German a dialect or a language? Is Romansch really a dialect of Italian? Strangely enough, it is probably only linguists who understand the very great extent to which these questions are not linguistic questions at all, but cultural and political ones. Because they are not linguistic questions, it would be foolish for a linguist to attempt to answer them, and I shall therefore not attempt to do so.

Peter TRUDGILL