Imagine that it is 1962, you are in the Cavern, the Beatles are playing and you are hearing – for the first time – ‘Love Me Do’. The quality of the group’s PA system means that the only words you are sure you understand are those in the title. But that doesn’t matter; the song has an overall effect on you as a performance, in which lyrical detail is not important. Later that year, you buy the single and soon you can sing all the words along with the group. But you don’t give the words any close, reflective consideration, because it’s not that kind of song.

Jump now to 1967, where you and your friends have been listening to ‘A Day In The Life’. Like everyone else, you have only heard it on disc, because the song is never performed live. Not only are the words clearer, they are also printed out for you to follow on the record cover. As the song finishes, someone says, ‘What do you think it’s about?’ and everyone has an opinion.

Anyone who has followed the Beatles’ career knows that the style of their songs changed over the years they were together – but exactly how did the language of the songs change? In this chapter, we shall seek to answer this question by analysing the lyrics of those songs written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, or occasionally George Harrison, and recorded by the Beatles. The methods we shall use are of the kind known as ‘discourse analysis’. By ‘discourse’, we mean language as it occurs in social context; and by ‘analysis’, we mean the careful consideration of the meanings which forms of words take on in context, and the relationship between choices of words and the overall structure of the texts they compose (see Cook 1992, 1994). We shall offer some explanations of the changes which come to light, although we shall certainly not be attempting to say what any of the songs are ‘really about’. One of the principles of discourse analysis is that the meaning of any text (and perhaps especially any song)
varies, depending on who is listening to it, the circumstances in which they hear it, and the way in which they relate it to their own ideas and concerns. We also recognize that lyrics can only be fully appreciated in the company of rhythm and melody. Unlike a poem or a novel, a popular song depends for its existence upon some kind of performance – whether on stage or in the recording studio.

Nevertheless, songwriters are people working inside cultures and social contexts, and like anyone else the ways in which they use language are bound to reflect their conscious and unconscious responses to the lives they are living and the goals they are pursuing. Lennon, McCartney and Harrison wrote songs of immense popularity in a period of significant cultural change, a period in which each of them also made the personal transition from struggling club musician to member of the world’s most popular and influential group. It is for these reasons that we feel it is justifiable and interesting to take their lyrics out of their musical context and consider them simply as words. As the publication of the words on record sleeves and inserts seems to indicate, together with a growing market for books of lyrics, this focus also reflects a change in attitude to pop lyrics in exactly the period we are considering.

THE ‘EARLY’ AND ‘LATER’ SONGS

As others (for example, Inglis 1997) have suggested, the songs written and recorded by the Beatles can be divided into two periods: ‘early’ (1962–5) and ‘later’ (1966–70). The songs of each period differ in their suitability for performance, the instruments used, the nature of the music, and the range of subject matter. In the early period the songs could be – and were – performed live by the four Beatles with three guitars and a drum kit. A vocal melody with intermittent sung harmonies was imposed over a steady rhythm, usually prefaced, punctuated and rounded off with a lead guitar riff. The subject matter was always romantic love. In the second period the majority of songs could not be easily performed live, and consequently never were. The original guitars and drums were augmented or replaced, not only by familiar pop instruments such as the harmonica, piano or organ, but also – adventurously and experimentally – by sitars, full orchestras, brass sections, barrel organs, recorders. The music became more complex and eclectic, and the words dealt unpredictably with a much wider variety of topics: taxation, pulp fiction, circus acts, traffic