3

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we attempted to characterise the three major French-speaking areas of Europe in a wider sociolinguistic perspective, while at the same time focussing on various aspects of their different histories that seem to contribute significantly to their national identity and its linguistic manifestations. The historical diversity discussed in Chapter 2 contrasts sharply with the relative uniformity of transnational trends that have affected western societies in comparable, but not identical, ways since the 1950s. This chapter, as the sub-title implies, will evoke these trends on three levels, according to a model used by Bassand (2004) to examine the development of large and often somewhat inchoate urban areas as follows:

(1) substantive (morphological) transformations
(2) changes in social practices
(3) changes in symbolic representations.

Given the interlocking nature of the three aspects, it is hardly feasible to separate them. For instance, the world-wide phenomenon of increasing urbanisation, while from a global perspective characterised by differences indicative of what can for convenience be called a ‘north-south’ divide, show broadly similar patterns across more technologically advanced societies, and these are exemplified quite typically in France, Belgium and Switzerland. The late 20th century was marked by increased metropolisation, the progressive expansion of towns and
cities into the surrounding areas, beyond the older suburbs. This new type of urbanisation implies substantive changes affecting the building of houses, roads and places of business, and widespread car ownership (or less frequently, the development of adequate public-transport connections). These morphological changes both reflect and influence changes in lifestyle and outlook. Many people who grew up in towns are now prepared to drive considerable distances into a nearby urban centre for work and recreation so as to be able to enjoy a ‘rural’ environment on their doorstep. This composite lifestyle, aiming to enjoy the best of town and country, might preclude, for instance, going home for lunch and even a shared family meal in the evening. A long drive increases the potential audiences of radio stations and bolsters the market for CDs, and more recently MP3s. Both the lifestyle (social practices) and outlook (symbolic representations) of such persons are generally more characteristic of the urban than the rural (Section 3.4).

We have chosen to focus on seven aspects of society (Sections 3.2 to 3.8) using this threefold perspective, before analysing a selected number of social practices which are particularly telling in regard to changes in symbolic representations, and which seem to illustrate both patterns of diffusion and the nexus of attitudes and influences contributing to the zeitgeist of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Sociologists and linguists have long recognised that changes in linguistic behaviour (even if examined as system-internal changes) reflect social changes and also, at least by implication, that these changes do not occur in isolation from mutations in other social practices and representations. Yet few studies have attempted in any detail to relate substantive macro-level changes to linguistic mutations. It is of course not possible to relate specific linguistic changes to precise social causes at a national, regional or usually even community level, although most speakers in a given location will be influenced by them, at least to some degree. Our approach is intended therefore to complement rather than to impugn any locally based correlations reported by other scholars as significant in the light of local factors. Labov’s study of Martha’s Vineyard is the classic case of the latter type, but these are rare in relating social practice directly to language variation and change. What we attempt to do here is to present the macro-environment in sufficient detail to provide a backdrop which explains as coherently as possible, however probabilistically, the synthesis of variationist and dialectological studies which follows in subsequent chapters.

Section 3.2 discusses the emergence of the post-industrial economy, where the tertiary sector now provides more than two-thirds of all