1 The nature of the standard

In this chapter we attempt to characterize the essential features of standard languages. In the interests of clear exposition we set out these features below in separate sections, although it will be seen that they overlap. These features of the standard refer to the following attributes: the standard as an ideology, which includes beliefs about its beauty, logical nature and efficiency; the socially dominant variety; the overlay acquired subsequent to the vernacular; the synecdochic variety; that which is regionless. We then look at some examples of folk-linguistic perceptions of the standard, before considering more closely the essential characteristics of ideologies as they concern us here.

1.1 The standard as an ideology

Milroy and Milroy (1999) suggest that a standard language is an abstraction, or more specifically, since all languages are abstractions, an ideology. The terms ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ are of course used by specialists in an ostensibly value-neutral sense, even if this specialized use of these terms does not match with their everyday currency; but normative terms like ‘sub-standard’, among many others, are frequent among linguistically naive speakers who have absorbed the ‘ideology of the standard’ (Milroy and Milroy 1999), which sees the standard as the only language worthy of the name, and the associated non-standard varieties as imperfect approximations to it. One view current in sociolinguistics sees standardization as a form of cultural oppression, most obviously by the upper classes, and indeed it is hard from this viewpoint to see the social advantage accruing to most speakers through their acceptance of the ideology of the standard. The notion of this ideology also explains style variation, which is linguistic accommodation determined by social situation; very few speakers enjoy such linguistic security that they can neglect to adapt their speech to someone of different social status, and this is the root of stylistic or situational variation. L. Milroy (2003: 161) cites Silverstein’s (1979: 193) definition of
language ideologies, which is as follows: they are ‘sets of beliefs about lan-
guage articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived
language structure and use’. The view we adopt in this book is that stand-
ardization is the expression of a broader ideology, to do with a hierarchical,
as opposed to an egalitarian, view of how society should be ordered. From
that perspective, the sets of beliefs alluded to in Silverstein’s definition of
language ideologies can be understood as ‘second-order’ ideologies, such
that, in a fairly obvious way, the standard borrows prestige from the power
of its users. Less obviously perhaps, the perceived invariance of the standard
derives too from the hierarchical viewpoint that opposes change.

It should be pointed out in this connection that the oppressive view of
social and linguistic hegemony highlighted above neglects the importance
of ‘culture’, in the sense of the individual’s subjective experience. It has
been assumed until fairly recently that social class is generally the major
element that determines social structure and that drives changes in it. The
more recent development in cultural studies known as the ‘cultural turn’
lays stress on the difficulty of disentangling the various social and economic
elements in any cultural phenomenon under examination – the phrase is
calqued on the earlier ‘linguistic turn’ applied to positivist philosophy, and
refers to a turn to, or emphasis on, the study of culture in disciplines that
attempt to theorize social and cultural history. The cultural turn is in con-
trast to, say, a ‘vulgar’ Marxist approach (Eagleton 1991) that lays stress on
the economic as underlying the social, and on an ‘objective’ view of any
given situation as against the ‘false consciousness’ that may be held to afflict
a social class. Clearly, however, economic, social and cultural elements and
effects can scarcely be separated out in a hierarchical way, for instance in
the rather crude Marxist ‘base–superstructure’ model according to which
the cultural and social merely express the economic (we recognize that
other Marxist approaches have greater subtlety). The ‘vulgar’ view cannot
be supported in any strong sense, since the perspective of an individual or
community on their socio-cultural experience forms an integral part of that
experience, and cannot be overridden by any ‘objective’ viewpoint, as no
cogent argument supports the theorist’s claim to that privilege. The point
need not be laboured any further, beyond saying that the complex congeries
of factors that determines a speaker’s response to the pressure of standardiza-
tion is resistant to any straightforward analysis. Speakers’ responses are in
any event not of a piece, either with each other or with their behaviour; it is
well known that working-class speakers pay (or paid) lip service to the stand-
ard while using their vernacular in the local networks which are meaningful
to them. We shall have occasion to consider this global–local opposition
when we come to examine the role of ideology more closely, below.

The schematic and static view of the standard, which for clear expo-
station ignores the fact of standardization as a process, reifies and opposes the
standard language (or languages) and non-standard varieties. The process