

CHAPTER ONE

Introductory Comments

About German

German, with about 100,000,000 native speakers, is an important world language. In terms of numbers of native speakers it ranks approximately seventh among the world's languages, behind Mandarin Chinese, English, Russian, Spanish, Hindi and Bengali, and ranks on a par with Japanese, Arabic and Portuguese [Fromkin, Rodman, Collins and Blair (1984:315ff)]. It is the only official language of the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, and it is one of the official languages of Switzerland and Luxemburg. German has official status in one part of Belgium bordering on the Federal Republic. It is also spoken by sizeable groups in France (Alsace-Lorraine) and Italy (South Tyrol) in western Europe, and in parts of Hungary, Rumania and what used to be Czechoslovakia in eastern Europe. Until the unification of the two Germanys in 1990 it occupied a unique position among the world's languages in being the only language which was the official language of both a NATO member, allied with the West (the Federal Republic) and a Warsaw Pact member, allied with the East (the German Democratic Republic). Austria is politically neutral, as are Switzerland and Liechtenstein, while Luxemburg is the banking centre of the European Community, hence allied with the West. Furthermore, German long served as a *lingua franca* in eastern Europe, a role which, given the political events of recent times, it seems destined to resume. The Federal Republic is the dominant economy in the European Community and the Democratic Republic was the dominant economy of the Eastern Bloc. German thus was and is an important political and trade language, and its importance has undoubtedly increased with the arrival of 1992 and a unified western Europe. It is therefore not sufficient for Australian students who are studying German at university level merely to be able to read, write and speak German. They also need to know something about the societies in which this language is spoken, about its relationship to its speakers and about its relationship to other languages of Europe. Also, since German is an important emigrant language, spoken widely in North and South America and in Australia, students of German need to be aware of its role in societies outside its home territory of Europe. Finally, students of any language at this level of study should learn something about the history and structure of that language and about the workings of human language in general.

What is Linguistics and why study it?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. The so-called natural sciences (e.g. physics, geology, chemistry, biology) are concerned with the investigation of phenomena which occur in nature. Human language, like gravity and the chemical elements, is a phenomenon which occurs in nature and is therefore a proper subject of scientific enquiry. The type of linguistics which is concerned with systematically accounting for what does and does not occur in human language is therefore properly a natural science. On the other hand, language is bound up intimately with the human

race. Every normal human being has at least one language at his or her disposal. Some lucky individuals have more than one. Human society without language is inconceivable. This is so because human society without communication between humans is inconceivable, and language is the major medium of communication between humans. That is its function. Language allows one human being to communicate with others. We have spoken before of language as a natural phenomenon and of its place as one of the natural sciences. However, since language is so inextricably intertwined with humans, it can also be studied as a form of human activity, parallel to history, sociology and art. In other words, linguistics can be considered both a natural science, because it investigates naturally occurring phenomena, and one of the humanities, because it investigates something which is intimately associated with human beings and with human activity.

Because every normal human being uses at least one language, it is natural for people to be interested in language, just as it is natural and common for people to be interested in other phenomena which are part of the human condition. As a result, and because it is so vital to our existence, everyone seems to have opinions about language. For instance, one has only to read the daily newspapers to see how interested people are in language and how opinionated people are about it. In itself it is probably a good thing that people take so much interest in their language, but, unfortunately, much of what appears in public about language is poorly informed and more indicative of people's prejudices than of their perspicacity. One of the purposes of this course is to make you **intelligently aware** of human language. Another way of putting this might be to say that one purpose of the course is to chip away at your prejudices about language.

Let us briefly look at some commonly held opinions about language. One is that one variety of a language is somehow superior to another, e.g. that British English is somehow "better" than Australian English or that the German spoken in north Germany is in some way preferable to that spoken in the south. Such statements are social evaluations rather than linguistic evaluations. No language or variety of a language has more inherent "value" than any other. Another commonly held opinion is that English (or German or whatever) is in decline because of changes which are taking place in the language or which have already taken place. For instance, in the 1950's and 1960's there was a great deal of concern in English-speaking societies about the increasing use of "contact" as a verb rather than as a noun. Critics of such expressions as "I will contact you" preferred "I will be in contact with you" on the grounds that *contact* had always been exclusively a noun and should remain a noun. The gradual change in the use of *contact* was viewed with alarm by many who saw various sinister implications behind it, ranging from undesirable influence to the total bastardisation of the language. It may well surprise you to hear that the word *contact* was once a cause of controversy. Today *contact* is used routinely as a verb and nobody gets upset about it any more. But it is easy to find similar cases valid for today's English. A similar controversy rages today about the use of *hopefully* to mean "it is to be hoped" rather than its older meaning "in a hopeful manner". Critics of new usages seem to have in common at least three misconceptions about language. One is that there was a time, often imagined to be during the critic's youth (e.g. "When I was in school, we knew what *hopefully* meant"), when everyone spoke the language "correctly" and that any change from that supposed norm is a change for the worse. Another is that words have some sort of inherent meaning which is "correct", when, in fact, words mean what they do because the speakers of a language are in general agreement as to what they mean. The third is that language change is somehow unnatural and should be legislated against. The truth is, of course, that language is constantly changing (compare Shakespeare's English to today's), that no two people ever speak the same language in exactly the same way, and, consequently, that there was **never** a time when English, or German, or any other language, was spoken by everyone to everyone else's satisfaction.

A linguist dealing with *hopefully* would note that the word has acquired a second meaning as a sentence adverbial, thus paralleling other sentence adverbials like "supposedly" (= it is to be supposed) and "presumably" (= it is to be presumed). A linguist who is interested in the relationship of language to society would also note when this usage was first attested and the unease with which it was greeted, but recording this information is more a sociological pursuit than a purely scientific one. What is particularly important is that a linguist would not pass judgment on whether or not this particular usage is a **good** thing or a **bad** thing, any more than a chemist would pass judgment on whether, let us say, carbon is a **good** element or a **bad** element. The linguist, being human, might have a personal opinion about whether "hopefully" should be used to mean "I hope", but such an opinion has no place in a linguistic description, and a good linguist, interested primarily in description, would suppress such an opinion.

Description versus Prescription

The difference between a person who writes letters to the editor complaining about the fact that some people use "hopefully" to mean "I hope" and a person who records the fact that for many people "hopefully" means "I hope" but that for many others it does not is the difference between a person who wants to determine how other people **should** speak and one who is interested in how people actually **do** speak. The one who wishes to outlaw "hopefully" in the meaning "I hope" is a **prescriptivist** - one who wishes to prescribe the rules for others to obey. The person who records how the language is actually used is a **descriptivist**, interested only in valid description. The reason that so much of what one reads about language is so uninformed is that it is usually written by prescriptivists who are concerned with the "purity" of the language, a state of affairs which has never existed and which never will exist.

The approach to human language which will be presented in this course is descriptivist. Linguists, who consider themselves natural scientists, are concerned only with recording and accounting for what is actually there and do not consider that they, or anyone else, have the right to determine how language should be used. For linguists, prescriptivism is outside the realm of science.

Prescriptivist statements are, however, not without their uses, but they are seldom the uses to which they were intended to be put. Prescriptive statements can be very informative about the actual state of affairs and can therefore be useful to descriptivists. For instance, nobody ever complains that the English word *coconut* is being used to mean *telephone*. Nobody ever uses it that way, and there is therefore no need to argue against it. But if one reads a statement like "*contact* is a noun and should under no circumstances be used as a verb - the correct expression is *to be in contact with* or *to get in contact with*", then one can conclude that the use of *contact* as a verb is reasonably widespread. Similarly, if one reads in a pronunciation dictionary of German that one should avoid a particular pronunciation, which is then described in detail, one can be sure that that pronunciation is reasonably widespread. We shall see an example of this later in the course.

In this course we will be interested primarily in accounting for the facts, i.e. in accounting for how people speak German, rather than in how supposed authorities think German should be spoken. When useful, parallels will be drawn with English, and since this is Australia and since the most common type of English spoken here is Australian English, Australian English will be taken as the standard variety of English for the purposes of this course.