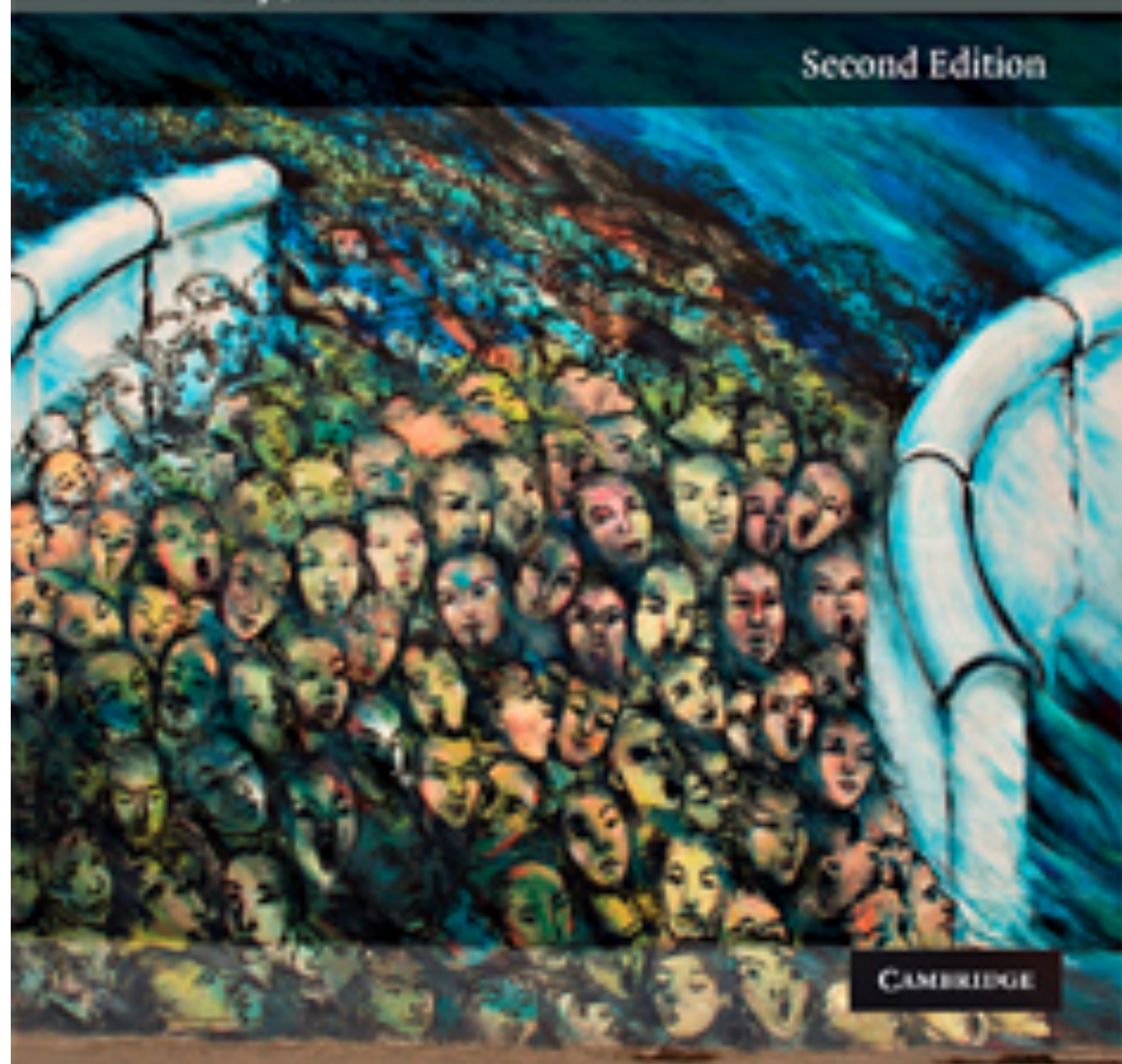


Exploring the German Language

Sally Johnson and Natalie Braber

Second Edition



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10 Variation in German

In the early stages of learning a foreign language, it is easy to believe that all we need to do is to master the rules of grammar, learn some vocabulary, and try to pronounce everything such that native speakers will hopefully understand us. These tasks keep us fairly well occupied until we spend some time in a country where the language is spoken. There we often realise that things are not as simple as we might have thought, since native speakers do not always seem to use the kind of language we have been learning. Frequently, they appear to break the rules of grammar we have so arduously internalised; they use words in ways we have not encountered before; and, most noticeably perhaps, their pronunciation of those words does not always coincide with the pronunciation we have been taught.

What the foreign language learner finds in such situations is known in linguistics as **variation**. By this, we mean that the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation of any language will vary according to who is communicating with whom, in what situation and on what topic. By contrast, the kind of language we learn in the classroom is, of necessity, more uniform. This is because most teaching and learning is based on what is considered to be the **standard** variety of the foreign language in question.

In all modern societies it is, of course, helpful to have standard languages. This is because people from different regions of a country must be able to communicate with one another, both in speech and in writing. Also, foreign learners of the language need to know which variety will be most widely accepted and understood. But it is important to remember that standard German was developed primarily on the basis of the *written* language. Also, the norms of standard pronunciation (in Germany, at least) are based on regional dialects found in the *north* of the country. Thus, there always was, and probably always will be, considerable variation in the way German is used. In other words, people do not always speak the language as they would write it nor, when speaking, do they necessarily conform to the north German model of standard pronunciation.

It is not only German which is subject to such variation. It is a characteristic of all living languages that they are used differently by different people in different situations. Consider, for example, the following: your best friend, your favourite film star and the Prime Minister. Do they all speak in exactly the same way? Is their pronunciation identical: do they use the same kinds of vocabulary?

The answer to these questions is clearly ‘no’. This is because the language used by these people will vary according to their country/region of origin, social class, age, profession, gender and many other factors. In linguistics, the way in which people use language differently according to the social groups to which they belong is known as **variation according to user**.

Now try to think of the way in which *you* would speak to the following people in your own language: your best friend, a prospective employer or a famous person. Would the way you speak to these people be identical? Now imagine you were writing a letter to each of them. Would you use the same kind of language in each letter? And would the way you write to these people be the same as the way you would address them face-to-face? Again the answer is clearly ‘no’. This is because most language users realise that they need to adapt their language according to the medium of communication (e.g. spoken or written) and the level of formality of the situation in which they find themselves. In linguistics, the way in which people use language differently in different situations is known as **variation according to use**.

In chapter 9, we talked about the kinds of knowledge which advanced learners of a foreign language must have if they are to use that language not just correctly but also appropriately. It should be clear by now that learning German is more than just a question of getting the pronunciation and grammar right, or memorising large amounts of vocabulary. In this chapter, we shall see how it is also essential to understand something about when and why native speakers *vary* their use of German. Similarly, learners need to know how to adapt their own usage in order to enable them to produce the right kind of German in the right place at the right time.

The branch of linguistics most directly concerned with variation is known as **sociolinguistics**. Sociolinguists are interested both in *how* people vary their language and *why*. In this chapter, we shall be exploring each of these aspects of variation, looking at the ways in which the use of German can differ, but also the underlying reasons for these differences.

10.1 Variation according to user

Consider speaking, in your own language, to someone you have never met before on the telephone. What kind of information will you be able to deduce about that person simply by listening to the way they speak? Can you tell which country or region they come from? Can you gain an impression of their social class background? Would you be able to make assumptions regarding their level of education or even their intelligence? In all probability, by the time the phone call is over, you will have a pretty clear mental picture of what that person is like.

Should you ever meet the person to whom you were speaking on the telephone, the chances are that he or she will bear little resemblance to the person

you had imagined. This is because the judgements we make are frequently tainted by prejudice and stereotypes, and all too often are simply wrong. But none of this prevents us from making such judgements in the first place. It is a natural feature of human behaviour that we constantly evaluate other people in order to find out who they are and what they are like. We then process this information (albeit subconsciously) so as to gauge how we should behave towards them and how we expect them to behave towards us. In order to do this, we use *linguistic cues* in much the same way that most of us form an opinion about people by the clothes they are wearing.

Native speakers possess a considerable amount of social and cultural knowledge about their own language. This is knowledge which they have acquired through growing up and living within a culture where that language is used. They tend therefore to know what kinds of judgements are commonly made about their language, and which features of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar carry the relevant messages. Consider, for example, the following ways of pronouncing the English words 'far' and 'house':

'far' [fɑr]	versus	'far' [fɑ]
'house' [haʊs]	versus	'ouse' [aʊs]

Most native speakers of English will be able to infer some kind of information from the presence or absence of [r] in the word 'far', for example, whether the speaker is from the USA or Britain, or even from which particular part of Britain. Similarly, h-dropping might signal that the language being used is of a fairly casual register.

Inexperienced foreign learners of a language will not normally be in a position to process what they hear in this manner. In this section, therefore, we shall be looking at some of the ways in which German varies according to the people who use it, and consider how such variation might be interpreted by native speakers of German. We shall begin by looking at geographical/regional differences, before turning to social class, age and ethnicity.

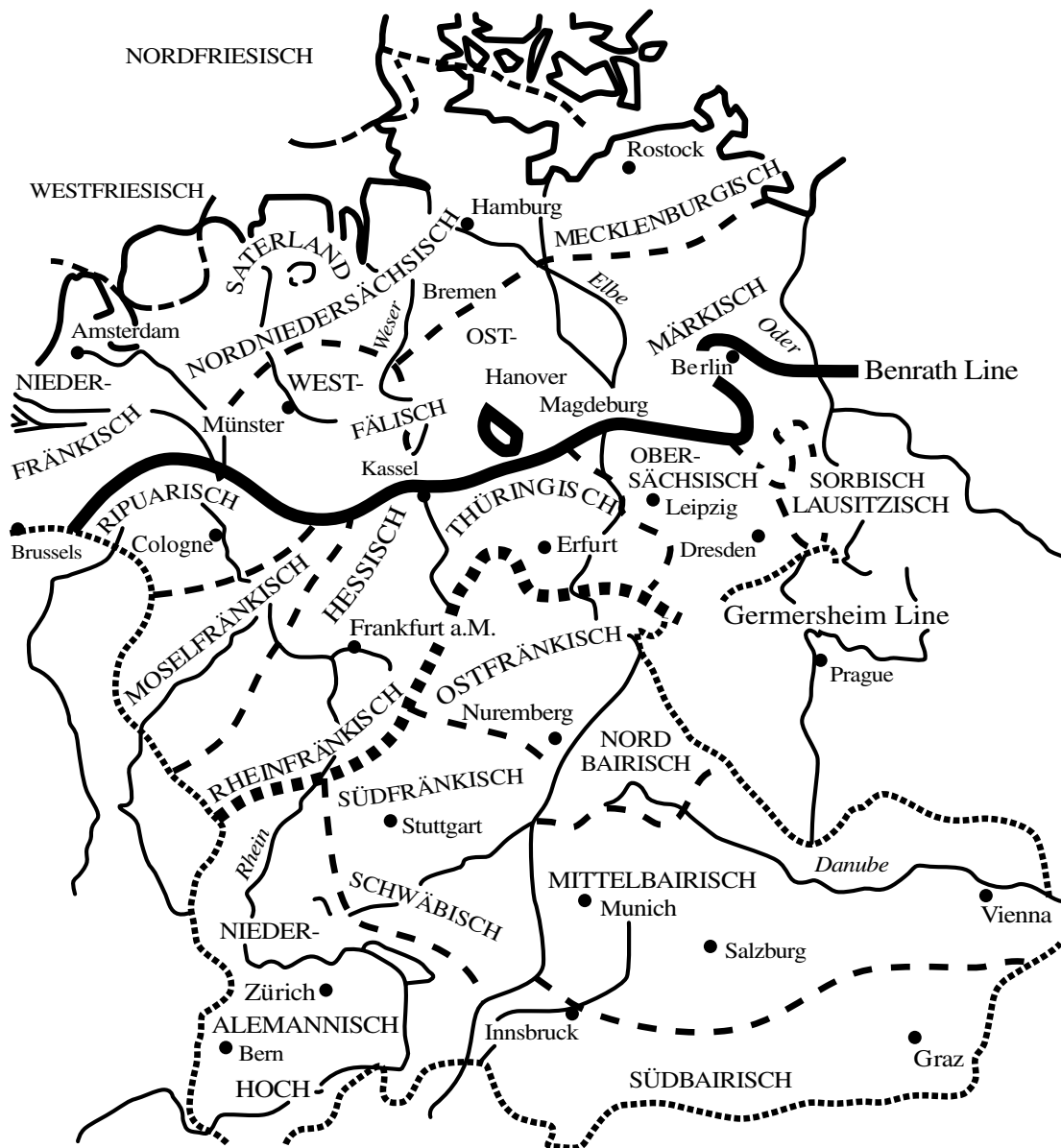
10.1.1 Geography

The most obvious kind of information we can glean from the speech of other people is their region or country of origin. We do this primarily on the basis of pronunciation, but also because of differences in vocabulary and grammar. Linguists make an important distinction in this regard. If it is only pronunciation which varies, it is customary to speak of **accent**. If there are differences in vocabulary, grammar *and* pronunciation, then we are dealing with **dialect**. Since British English was standardised comparatively early, regional variation tends to be limited to pronunciation, and is primarily a question of accent. In the German-speaking countries, however, where standardisation occurred much later, it is still possible to find many traditional dialects where pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar all differ markedly from

the standard language. The study of the distribution and use of dialects is known as **dialectology**.

Traditional German dialects and regional colloquial languages

Traditional German dialects can still be classified more or less in terms of the historical divisions discussed in chapter 2. In other words, the German-speaking countries can be divided into three broad areas, each of which contains a number of different dialects (see map 10.1 and table 10.1). Above the Benrath Line in the northern part of Germany, Low German dialects (*Niederdeutsch*) are still found, which were not affected by the High German (second) sound shift. Between the Benrath and Gernersheim Lines, Central German dialects (*Mitteldeutsch*) are spoken, which were only partially affected



Map 10.1 *Traditional German dialects*

Table 10.1 *Traditional German dialects*

NIEDERDEUTSCH (not affected by High German sound shift)	{	Westniederdeutsch	{	Schleswigsch Holsteinisch Nordniedersächsisch Westfälisch Ostfälisch
		Ostniederdeutsch	{	Mecklenburgisch Märkisch
MITTELDEUTSCH (partially affected by High German sound shift, e.g. <i>Apfel</i> not <i>Apfel</i>)	{	Westmitteldeutsch (<i>pund</i>)	{	Ripuarisch (<i>dat, dorp</i>) Moselfränkisch (<i>dat, dorf</i>) Rheinfränkisch (<i>das, dorf</i>) Hessisch (<i>das, dorf</i>)
		Ostmitteldeutsch (<i>fund</i>)	{	Thüringisch Obersächsisch
OBERDEUTSCH (fully affected by High German sound shift)	{	Oberfränkisch	{	Südfränkisch Ostfränkisch
			{	Nordbairisch Mittelbairisch Südbairisch
		Bairisch	{	Schwäbisch Niederalemannisch Hochalemannisch
			{	

(Adapted from Stedje, 2007: 245)

by the High German sound shift. Finally, below the Germersheim Line, that is, in southern Germany, Switzerland and Austria, Upper German dialects (*Oberdeutsch*) are spoken, which display all the features of the High German shift. (The lines on maps which divide different dialect areas are known as **isoglosses**.)

Although dialect continues to function as an extremely important marker of regional and social identity in Germany, traditional dialects have been in general decline during the past 200 years or so (see section 2.3.1). There are three main reasons for this. First, dialects have been much derided since the nineteenth century due to the higher prestige increasingly afforded to standard usage. Second, mass migration and urbanisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant that many people have moved away from their traditional dialect-speaking areas (typically from villages to towns). Third, the influence of the media, education and tourism has meant that all speakers are now in more or less continuous contact with the standard language.

As a result of these changes new forms of language have gradually gained in importance during the twentieth century, which are often referred to as regional colloquial languages (*regionale Umgangssprachen*). These varieties are probably closer to the standard language than to the traditional dialects, but still contain features of vocabulary and pronunciation (especially intonation) which are recognisably typical of certain areas. Examples of such colloquial languages are to be found in Baden-Württemberg, and in and around Berlin.

Finally, even though it is possible to talk about ‘traditional German dialects’, ‘regional colloquial languages’ and ‘standard German’ as though they were quite separate, it is important to emphasise that these are *not* discrete varieties. On the contrary, most speakers vary their usage between these different styles of German in quite subtle – and sometimes less subtle – ways. It is therefore helpful to think of regional variation in German as a continuum. Having said this, the reasons why speakers move up and down this continuum are not simply a question of regional origin, but are closely linked to social class status, and to the formality of the situation in which speakers find themselves at any given time.

Dialect and standard in Germany, Switzerland and Austria

The relationship between standard language and dialect usage is not the same in all the German-speaking countries. Yet the standard varieties of German found in Switzerland and Austria are often classified as ‘dialects’ of *Binnendeutsch*, i.e. the German used in the Federal Republic of Germany. This is misleading because both Switzerland and Austria have their own standardised versions of German, namely, Swiss Standard/High German and Austrian Standard German, as well as a number of indigenous regional dialects.

There are probably two main reasons why the standard varieties of Switzerland and Austria tend to be misclassified as dialects of *Binnendeutsch*. First, Germany is the largest of the German-speaking countries, and is therefore often perceived to be the home of the ‘real’ standard. Second, for obvious geographical reasons, the standard varieties of Switzerland and Austria are closely related to the regional dialects which are spoken in the south of Germany, particularly in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, respectively.

To avoid misunderstandings, many linguists prefer the term **national variety** of German when discussing the different standard languages used in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Moreover, any language which has more than one recognised standard form can be described as **pluricentric**. English is probably the clearest example of a pluricentric language since there are so many different standards, for example, in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, India, Singapore and South Africa. But it is equally possible to refer to German as a pluricentric language with differing norms in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

Geographical variants of German

What then are the main linguistic features typical of the different parts of the German-speaking areas? Clearly, there is insufficient space here to

describe the precise differences between all the regional and national varieties. However, it will still be possible to mention a few features which are generally considered typical of certain areas such as the north and centre of Germany, and south Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Tables 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4 outline some of the main phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic variants found in German, i.e. differences in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.

Table 10.2 *Phonological variants*

Area	Word	Standard pronunciation	Regional pronunciation
NORTH	<i>Pfund</i>	[pfʊnt]	Word-initial [pf] often pronounced as [f], e.g. <i>funt</i> [fʊnt].
	<i>Rat</i> <i>grob</i>	[rat] [gʁop]	Long vowels often pronounced short in monosyllabic words, e.g. <i>ratt</i> [rat] and <i>gropp</i> [gʁɔp].
	<i>nicht</i>	[nɪçt]	Final [t] often deleted, e.g. <i>nich</i> [nɪç].
NORTH + CENTRE	<i>dreißig</i> <i>Zeug</i>	[draisɪk] [tsɔɪk]	Final [k] pronounced as [ç], e.g. [draisɪç] and [tsɔɪç].
	<i>rot</i>	–	[ʀ] pronounced as uvular roll (see sections 4.2.4 and 4.4.2).
	<i>geht</i> <i>gemacht</i>	[get] [gəmaxt]	Salient-initial [g] pronounced as [j], e.g. <i>jeht</i> [jet] and <i>jemacht</i> [jəmaxt] (especially Berlin and Cologne).
CENTRE + SOUTH	<i>ich</i> <i>mich</i>	[ɪç] [mɪç]	<i>ch</i> often pronounced like <i>sch</i> , e.g. <i>isch</i> [ɪʃ] and <i>misch</i> [mɪʃ].
	<i>lachen</i> <i>Lampen</i>	[laxən] [lampən]	Word-final [n] often lost, e.g. <i>lache</i> [laxə] and <i>Lampe</i> [lampə].
	<i>packen/</i> <i>backen</i> <i>Tier/dir</i> <i>Garten/</i> <i>Karten</i>	[pakən]/ [bakən] [tiɐ̯]/[diɐ̯] [gartən]/ [kartən]	Distinction between voiced and voiceless plosives/fricatives lost, a process known as lenition . Hence: <i>bagge</i> [bagə], <i>dia</i> [diɐ̯], <i>Garde</i> [gardə]. (Meaning of words becomes clear in context.)
	<i>Brüder</i> <i>schön</i>	[brydɐ] [ʃøn]	[y] and [ø] pronounced as [i] and [e], respectively, e.g. <i>Brieder</i> [bridɐ], <i>scheen</i> [ʃen].

Table 10.2 (*cont.*)

Area	Word	Standard pronunciation	Regional pronunciation
	<i>Wasser schlafen</i>	[vasə] [ʃlafən]	[a] pronounced as [ɔ], e.g. <i>Wosser</i> [vɔsə] and <i>schlofen</i> [ʃlɔfən].
	<i>heute Leute</i>	[hɔitə] [lɔitə]	Word-final schwa often lost, e.g. <i>heut</i> [hɔit] and <i>Leut</i> [lɔit].
	<i>nicht</i>	[niçt]	Pronounced <i>net</i> [nɛt] or <i>nit</i> [nit].
SOUTH	<i>China</i>	[çina]	[ç] pronounced as [k], e.g. <i>Kina</i> [kina].
	<i>rot</i>	—	[r] pronounced as alveolar roll (see sections 4.2.4 and 4.4.2).
	<i>gemacht bestellt</i>	[gəmaxt] [bəʃtɛlt]	Schwa often deleted in prefixes, e.g. <i>gmacht</i> [gmɔxt], <i>bstellt</i> [bʃtɛlt].
	<i>sagen lesen</i>	[zɑgən] [lezən]	Salient-initial [z] often pronounced as [s], e.g. <i>sagen</i> [sɔgən] and <i>lesen</i> [lesən].
	<i>beste Wespe (SW)</i>	[bəstə] [vɛspə]	[st] and [sp] pronounced as [ʃt] and [ʃp], e.g. <i>beschte</i> [bəʃtə] and <i>Weschpe</i> [vɛʃpə].
	<i>Kaffee Tabak</i>	['kafɐ] ['tabak]	Word stress on final syllable, e.g. <i>Ka'ffee</i> [ka'fe] and <i>Ta'bak</i> [ta'bak].

(Adapted from Durrell, 2003: 15–16)

Table 10.3 *Lexical variants*

Area	Standard variant	Regional variant	English
NORTH	<i>Abendessen sehen der Fleischer das Butterbrot</i>	<i>Abendbrot kucken/kieken der Schlachter die Stulle</i>	supper to look/see butcher sandwich
CENTRE + SOUTH	<i>zu Hause nicht wahr? der Fleischer der Rotkohl der Tischler</i>	<i>daheim gell? der Metzger das Rotkraut (C)/ das Blaukraut (S) der Schreiner</i>	at home ... isn't it/aren't they, etc.? butcher red cabbage carpenter/joiner

Table 10.3 (*cont.*)

Area	Standard variant	Regional variant	English
SOUTH	<i>immer</i> <i>sehr</i> <i>der Junge</i> <i>die Kartoffel</i> <i>die Straße</i> <i>schnell</i> <i>der Schrank</i> <i>das Mädchen</i> <i>nicht mehr</i> <i>die Apfelsine</i> <i>die Sahne</i> <i>arbeiten</i> <i>sehen</i> <i>das Brötchen</i>	<i>alleweil (SE)</i> <i>arg</i> <i>der Bub</i> <i>der Erdapfel (SE)</i> <i>die Gasse (SE)</i> <i>geschwind</i> <i>der Kasten</i> <i>das Mäd(e)l/Mädle</i> <i>nimmer</i> <i>die Orange</i> <i>der Rahm</i> <i>schaffen (SW)</i> <i>schauen</i> <i>die Semmel (SE)</i> <i>der Wecken (SW)</i>	always very boy potato street quick(ly) cupboard girl no longer orange cream to work to see/look bread roll

(Adapted from Durrell, 2003: 23–5)

Table 10.4 *Morphosyntactic variants*

Area	Standard	Regional	Description
NORTH	<i>ich habe begonnen</i> <i>ich habe angefangen</i>	<i>ich bin begonnen</i> <i>ich bin angefangen</i>	<i>sein</i> not <i>haben</i> in past perfect of <i>beginnen</i> and <i>anfangen</i> .
	<i>er hat mich gesehen</i>	<i>er hat mir gesehen</i>	Variable use of accusative and dative.
	<i>die Doktor</i> <i>die Onkel</i> <i>die Wagen</i>	<i>die Doktors</i> <i>die Onkels</i> <i>die Wagens</i>	-s sometimes used to form plural nouns.
CENTRE + SOUTH	<i>gedacht</i> <i>gewinkt</i>	<i>gedenkt</i> <i>gewunken</i>	Use of different past participles.
	<i>das Auto, das da steht</i>	<i>das Auto, wo da steht</i>	<i>wo</i> used as relative pronoun.
SOUTH	<i>ich habe gelegen</i> <i>ich habe gesessen</i> <i>ich habe gestanden</i>	<i>ich bin gelegen</i> <i>ich bin gesessen</i> <i>ich bin gestanden</i>	<i>sein</i> used in past perfect of <i>liegen</i> , <i>sitzen</i> , <i>stehen</i> .

Table 10.4 (*cont.*)

Area	Standard	Regional	English
	<i>sie fuhr</i> <i>er sagte</i> <i>sie lachten</i>	<i>sie ist gefahren</i> <i>er hat gesagt</i> <i>sie haben gelacht</i>	No imperfect tense (see also section 10.2.3).
	<i>mit den Büchern</i>	<i>mit den Bücher</i> <i>mit die Bücher</i> (SE)	No -n in dative plural/no dative form of definite article.
	<i>die Wagen</i> <i>die Stücke</i> <i>die Stiefel</i>	<i>die Wägen</i> <i>die Stücker</i> <i>die Stiefeln</i>	Different plural forms.
	<i>die Butter</i> <i>das Radio</i> <i>die Gewalt</i> <i>die Schokolade</i> <i>die Kartoffel</i>	<i>der Butter</i> <i>der Radio</i> <i>der Gewalt</i> <i>der Schokolad</i> <i>der Kartoffel</i>	Variation in gender of nouns.
	<i>er schläft</i> <i>sie läßt</i>	<i>er schlaft</i> <i>sie laßt</i>	No umlaut in 3rd person present forms.

(Adapted from Durrell, 2003: 19–20)

10.1.2 Social class

The use of German, like most other languages, is closely related to the social class status of its speakers. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to find a satisfactory definition of social class in modern, industrial societies. Class could be based on a number of factors such as occupation, income, education or place of residence.

Whatever the problems of defining social class, it is still possible to say that the relationship between class and language usage depends very much on the historical status of the standard variety in question. In Britain, for example, there has been a long tradition of a standard accent known as **Received Pronunciation (RP)**. This is the accent of the *English* upper classes, and is closely linked to institutions such as the royal family, public schools and the BBC. Traditionally, the high social prestige afforded to RP has been accompanied by considerable prejudice towards non-standard and regional varieties of English, typically used by working-class speakers. In many cases, this has meant that a command of the standard language has been one of the prerequisites for access to certain high-status professions although this is undoubtedly changing.