Styles Geography provides a solid starting point when we aim to explain language variations. Dialectology is capable of accounting for many of the linguistic differences that often confuse those seeking a pure, unified language with a single set of correct forms. For instance, the distinctions between 'dived' and 'dove,' 'footpath' and 'pavement,' and the variations in the pronunciation of /bat/, /baː/, and /bad/ present challenging dilemmas for anyone attempting to describe the English language. The ability to categorize these variations based on geographic regions is incredibly helpful. Consequently, dictionaries can label forms as British, American, or Australian, implying the existence of unmarked, correct forms. However, even if this is accepted, there remains the issue of variations among individual speakers hailing from the same location. English speakers sometimes use 'don't' and at other times use 'do not.' Some Londoners occasionally pronounce /bot/ and at other times pronounce /baː/. If you carefully record any spoken English, you'll discover a consistent pattern of variation in the pronunciation of a single phoneme, in word choice, and in grammatical structures. A helpful initial explanation lies in the concepts of style and formality. At times, we are more meticulous and deliberate in our speech or writing, just as we might be more attentive or relaxed in other aspects of our behavior, such as our attire or eating habits. This varying degree of attention to linguistic variations forms a natural continuum, which can be divided into different levels. Each language possesses its unique way of categorizing these levels: some, like Javanese or Japanese, have a finely graded set of levels, explicitly marked through morphological and lexical choices Although the exact number of distinct points on this continuum isn't crucial, what's significantly noteworthy is the increasing awareness of stylistic variations. Many modern dictionaries and comprehensive grammars now include references to these levels. For instance, cautious writers or speakers are often warned about the potential reactions to their word choices, similar to etiquette guides advising on how to avoid awkward social situations. In Labov's New York City study (discussed earlier in Chapter 1), he discovered evidence of informal styles (particularly the vernacular) being used when a person being interviewed was interrupted by a child entering the room, or when they offered the interviewer coffee, or became engrossed in their story. Conversely, to elicit more formal speech, Labov would ask the subject to read a passage or a list of words. For more casual speech, he'd request that they recount an emotionally significant story. By comparing these three or four levels, he could analyze changes in specific linguistic features. In bilingual communities, these stylistic levels can be indicated by switching between languages. For example, Swiss officials might use Swiss German in informal settings but switch to High German for formal occasions. Similarly, Paraguayans might use Guarani for casual and intimate conversations but shift to Spanish for formal situations. Arabic speakers often use the vernacular in everyday conversations but switch to Modern Standard Arabic for public speeches. The commonly accepted explanation for these stylistic variations is that speakers and writers pay closer attention to their language as the situation becomes more formal. Consequently, they are more likely to adhere to the favored and educated norms of their society. This is largely influenced by formal education, especially in systems that aim to instill the prestigious norms associated with literacy. While the idea of increased attention or care is a reasonable explanation, it doesn't fully address the origins of these norms or account for conscious choices to use less or more formal styles. One potential explanation is the concept of... Audience Design A speaker who can command multiple language styles

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will choose a particular style based on the audience they're addressing. For instance, we might consciously opt for a casual tone when talking to strangers to appear friendly. This is connected to the unconscious process of accommodation; we instinctively adjust our speech to resemble our conversation partner. Both of these approaches highlight the significance of language in forming social bonds and reflecting a speaker's identity, a topic we'll delve into further later. It's important to note that this recognition of varying language styles as appropriate for different social contexts opposes the purist approach of normativism. Normativists argue that there's only one 'correct' way to speak and any deviation from this standard is incorrect. For example, when Webster's Dictionary introduced stylistic labels and included informal terms like 'ain't' in its fourth edition, many critics accused it of allowing 'barbarians' into the realm of pure English.

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