1 Introduction

1.1 Dimensions of grammatical variation

The grammatical patterns of languages often vary according to such factors as the formality of the situation in which a discourse or conversation is taking place, the social background of the speakers, or the medium being used (speech or writing). For example in English *we weren't there*, with *not* contracted to *n't*, is characteristic of spoken language, where it is appropriate in all but the most formal situations. *We wasn't there* is also 'colloquial', but has strong associations with working-class or uneducated usage. *We were not there* is more characteristic of written texts, and usually creates a 'stilted' effect in conversation (unless *not* is emphasized).

Similar differences exist in French, and they are the subject of this book. **Je ne comprends pas** (with **ne** and **pas**) is normal in writing and occurs in some spoken usage too. But in much everyday conversation, negatives are formed with **pas** only (**je comprends pas**). Other colloquial forms are stigmatized as 'uneducated' or 'lower-class': **j'ai rentré** (as opposed to **je suis rentré**), for example, is socially marked, just like *we wasn't*.

These three dimensions of variation (speech versus writing, formality/informality of situation, social level of speaker) need to be carefully distinguished, even though they do overlap to a considerable extent.

Spoken language is not inevitably more informal than written language. Someone speaking in public, for example, might well feel it appropriate to use features which would otherwise give a 'bookish' effect. Conversely, there are many novelists and journalists whose writing is characterized by its deliberately colloquial flavour (a number of examples will be given later, especially in 8.2).

The formality/informality dimension is also in principle independent of the social background dimension. Large numbers of speakers never use forms like **j'ai rentré** or *you wasn't*, no matter how relaxed and intimate the conversational setting might be. On the other hand, those who do have such patterns

as a regular part of their linguistic repertoire may well be capable of switching to a more 'middle-class' style when the need arises (if drafting a job application, for instance, or answering questions at an interview).

Grammatical structures can also vary from one geographical region to another. For example: some southern French speakers use **être** as its own auxiliary (**je suis été**); the past historic occurs in everyday conversation in southwestern France; speakers in the north-east use structures like **j'ai acheté un sandwich pour moi manger**; in Belgium **au plus . . . au plus** is encountered alongside **plus . . . plus** ('the more . . . the more'); in Switzerland demonstratives may be placed before infinitives (**on peut ça faire**). See Sanders (1993), Tuaillon (1988) and Walter (1988) for more details.

Striking though such uses may be, they are nevertheless rather exceptional, and should not obscure the very considerable extent of the 'core' colloquial French shared by all speakers, irrespective of their region of origin. Regional distinctiveness is in fact more apparent in pronunciation, and even in vocabulary, than in grammar. This dimension will therefore not be explored further here. Instead, this book concentrates on features which, though typical of everyday usage in the Paris area, are widely encountered elsewhere in European and for that matter North American French.

1.2 Sub-categories of standard and colloquial French

In what follows, a basic distinction will be drawn between 'standard' and 'colloquial' French grammar. Within the colloquial division, grammatical forms like **j'ai rentré**, which have social class connotations, are sub-categorized as 'popular'. (*Popular/populaire* in this context does not mean 'widely appreciated or enjoyed', of course, but relates to the 'usage of the (common) people'.) 'Popular' forms should be distinguished from 'familiar' ones (**je comprends pas**, for example), which are usable by all speakers, irrespective of their background. So *familiar/familier*, unlike *popular/populaire*, is a formality-related not a class-related term: it need not imply 'used exclusively by upper- and middle-class speakers'. Note the term *(français) relâché*, which is sometimes used as a general expression covering both these categories, and is equivalent to 'colloquial'.

Words, phrases and idiomatic expressions are also often categorized (e.g. in dictionaries) as *familier* or *populaire*, though rather haphazardly and inconsistently. The distinction between the two is probably easier to draw in relation to grammar: lexical (vocabulary) items pass through social class barriers with much less difficulty than grammatical features. However, even when grammar is being analysed, *familiar* and *popular* are not altogether watertight compartments: it is sometimes a moot point whether a feature

should be regarded as 'popular' or not, and within each of these two categories there are peripheral as well as more central items. Hence the need for qualifications: some familiar forms may be 'very' familiar, others only 'slightly' so.

One further difference between the sociology of grammar and that of vocabulary is that the so-called *langage des jeunes* (alternatively *langage des cités* or *langage des banlieues*), which is currently the object of so much interest and discussion, lacks distinctive grammatical features: the celebrated differences between the French of adolescents and that of their elders are almost entirely lexical. Reports of the non-use of verb endings by teenagers on high-rise estates are misleading. Only newly coined slang verbs are sometimes affected: **je pachave**, **j'ai pachave**, **je vais pachave** (**pachave**: 'sleep'). And even these usually contain an erstwhile ending which has been displaced by the syllable inversion characteristic of *verlan* ('backslang'): **j'ai pécho** (for **j'ai chopé**: 'I stole'). One or two minor innovations located on the borderline between grammar and vocabulary are none the less mentioned in 3.3.4 and 5.1.3.

Standard forms like **je ne comprends pas** (with **ne** as well as **pas**) are characteristic of writing and speech which adheres to the rules of approved usage – the *norm* – drawn up by grammarians over the last three centuries (see below). But some standard features have particularly formal or literary connotations (the imperfect subjunctive is an example), whereas others are usable in a much wider variety of situations.

Consequently, just as the colloquial range needs to be sub-divided, so too it is customary to set up sub-categories within the norm: the term *soigné* is applied to features which are strongly marked for formality or 'literariness'; *courant* to those which are more neutral (the **ne . . . pas** negative would fall into the latter category). Again, there is a gradient rather than a sharp transition from one division to the other. Taken together, *français courant* and *français soigné* constitute *le bon usage* ('correct usage') – *la norme*, or 'standard French' as the term is understood in this book.

There is a profusion of alternative French terminology in this area. *(Français) soigné* is also known as *français soutenu*, *français cultivé*, *français châtié* or (particularly when a hint of archaism is present) *français littéraire*. Instead of *français courant*, some writers refer to *français commun*, or (somewhat confusingly) *français standard*.

There are of course many areas of French grammar in which no variation is present and where informal and formal discourse follow the same patterns. To take one example: despite the many distinctive characteristics of colloquial relative clauses (see 2.3), the **que** in a phrase like **la voiture qu'il conduit** can never be omitted in French – of whatever variety (unlike *which* or *that* in English: 'the car he drives'). If a point of grammar is not discussed in this book, it is likely to be one where standard and colloquial usage coincide.

1.3 Levels of language

The various sub-categories are often aligned in a continuum and referred to as *registers* or *levels of language*:

français soigné ↔ *fr courant* ↔ *fr familier* ↔ *fr populaire*

This is convenient enough for the purposes of description and classification, as long as it is remembered that the formal/informal and the social class dimensions are partly conflated here: 'popular', as was explained in 1.2, is not simply a 'more colloquial' or 'more informal' extension of 'familiar'.

The following table shows how the various dimensions combine. The arrows in the section labelled 'medium' indicate that any register can in principle be either written or spoken, but that most examples of *français soigné* are written, whereas familiar and popular features are predominantly spoken.

	STANDARD ↔ COLLOQUIAL
degree of formality:	*formal* ↔ *neutral* ↔ *informal*
register/social variety:	*soigné* ↔ *courant* ↔ *fam* ↔ *pop*
medium:	*writing* ——————————→
	←—————————— *speech*

N.B. Because of the co-existence of several parameters, and the lack of clear-cut transitions between categories, there has been much debate about these classifications, and various other schemes have been proposed. For example, a number of accounts of French published in the UK (Ager 1990, Batchelor and Offord 1982, Offord 1990) make use of a three-way register division centring on the 'degree of formality' dimension, with R(egister)3 corresponding to 'formal', R2 to 'neutral', and R1 to 'informal'.

It is important always to bear in mind that, despite the use of terms like *la langue populaire* or *la langue littéraire*, it is not the case that 'popular French grammar', 'colloquial French grammar' or 'literary French' are complete, well-defined and self-sufficient systems. For one thing, the number of specifically popular features is actually fairly small. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, many grammatical features are common to all levels, and it will emerge in the following chapters that there can be fluctuation between alternatives within one and the same level.

The relationship between the various 'grammars' might be represented by three concentric circles. The innermost circle contains specifically popular forms; the next largest is for the more extensive set of familiar forms (used

also by *français populaire* speakers when no popular equivalents are available); the outermost circle contains the standard features, some of which also occur in colloquial usage, again in the absence of alternatives. Of course, as there are no sharp transitions, all the circles have fairly permeable or 'fuzzy' boundaries.

1.4 Origins of the standard/non-standard divergence

As the Table of Contents suggests, the points on which standard and colloquial French grammar diverge are many and varied. Undoubtedly, there are more of them than in the case of standard and colloquial English. And some very central areas of grammar are affected. The reasons for this need to be outlined, as the divergence has come to have important consequences for users of the language.

The rift began to appear in the seventeenth century, under the centralizing monarchies of Louis XIII and XIV. Much progress was made at that time in standardizing language use at the royal court: the French Academy (the 'guardian of the language') was founded in 1634; uniformity was imposed in large numbers of cases where usage had previously fluctuated (for example, the obligatory use of both **ne** and **pas** in negatives dates from this period); treatises on grammar began to appear in which the various rulings were presented and explained. Gradually the conviction emerged that a perfect language was being created: by the end of the eighteenth century it was widely believed in cultured circles that French possessed a logic and clarity that other languages lacked. Later generations of grammarians saw their task essentially as one of preserving the language in this pristine state; accordingly, the grammar of modern standard French has remained essentially unchanged over the last two to three hundred years.

Now although the users of the aristocratic French of Versailles were politically and economically dominant, their numbers were small: perhaps a few thousand out of a population of twenty million. Even so, before the 1789 Revolution, there was no attempt to spread the use of standard French more widely: attention was very much focused on the standardization process itself. So millions of people in the south, in Brittany, in Alsace and elsewhere knew little or no French, and continued to speak various regional languages. More to the point, even in the Paris region and other 'French'-speaking areas of northern France, the illiterate mass of the population were largely unaffected by the activities of the grammarians: everyday usage continued to evolve independently of their rulings.

This rift between standard and non-standard grammar began to be bridged only very much later – not until the latter half of the nineteenth century, in

fact. Particularly important was the introduction in the 1880s of a national system of compulsory primary education, a central aim of which was to spread the use of standard French throughout the territory of the Republic.

This was certainly effective in marginalizing regional languages. However, as far as French itself is concerned, most of the non-standard features that had developed were too firmly established by this time for it to be possible to eradicate them entirely. Depending on their level of education, speakers approximate to the norm to a greater or lesser extent when monitoring themselves (especially when writing). But in unguarded moments, non-standard features 'creep in'. The extent to which this is the case depends very much on the individual: a schoolteacher's usage – even when 'unmonitored' – will contain far more *bon usage* features than a manual worker's. But there are a number of non-standard patterns (like the omission of **ne**) which are extremely prevalent in informal usage, whoever the speaker may be.

1.5 Normative and descriptivist approaches

There are essentially two kinds of attitude today towards this state of affairs. At one extreme is the *normative* view that divergences from standard usage are regrettable *fautes de français* – that the only 'correct' French is the aristocratic dialect perfected over the centuries by the grammarians and enshrined in the classic works of French literature. The term *purist* is often applied to those who believe that change in language can only be for the worse and is therefore always to be resisted. Their unflattering descriptions of grammatical mistakes (*solécismes*) give some insight into their feelings: 'abominable faute', 'monstre authentique', 'solécisme ignoble', 'outrage à notre langue', to quote but a few examples.

To be contrasted with this is the *descriptivist* view that non-standard features represent the 'natural evolution' of the language, unimpeded by the interventions of grammarians. Colloquial French, from this standpoint, has its own system and its own logic. It is not to be rejected out of hand, but should be analysed and described objectively – on its own terms, not as though it were some kind of degenerate version of the norm. It is characteristic of this approach that the positively oriented term *français avancé*, with its hint of the 'French language of the future', is sometimes used (notably in Frei 1929) as an alternative to the rather disparaging *français familier/populaire*.

The consequence is that purists regard descriptivists as dangerous libertarians who are destroying a precious linguistic heritage. Descriptivists, on the other hand, regard purists as blinkered, unscientific pedants who

are unable or unwilling to recognize that languages inevitably change from generation to generation.

Many commentators of course take one of various intermediate positions, accepting certain particularly widespread non-standard forms, or at least acknowledging that the more *soigné* areas of the standard language are not appropriate for all situations. A relatively liberal line of this type has been taken by authors of major works of reference like Maurice Grevisse (*Le Bon Usage*) or Joseph Hanse (*Dictionnaire des difficultés de la langue française*). Even so, such works set out to make recommendations about usage, rather than simply to describe and analyse, and popular French in particular is not something with which they are concerned. Because such commentators seem still to be 'steering' or 'directing' usage in a particular direction (however discreetly), this intermediate approach is often referred to as *dirigiste*.

Among the more overtly normative commentators are the authors of numerous books offering guidance to native speakers of French who feel that their proficiency in the language leaves something to be desired. Typical titles are *Je connais mieux le français*, or *Le Guide du français correct*. The school classroom also continues to be a place where *bon usage* is propagated, and examination syllabuses have an important part to play in this process. Educationalists are influenced by the periodic pronouncements on questions of grammar (*mises en garde*) made by the French Academy, and the views expressed in specialized journals like the highly conservative *Défense de la langue française* (sponsored by the Academy). A further platform is provided by the *chroniques de langage* – regular columns in national and provincial newspapers where matters of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are discussed – though these days the approach of most *chroniqueurs* is less strongly normative than was the case thirty or forty years ago.

Descriptivists form a much smaller and more homogeneous group. Typically, they are university specialists who see it as their business to apply the methods and principles of linguistic theory not just to standard French, but to other varieties of the language. A number of comments by academic linguists on particular issues are quoted in this book, and some of the results of their research are also presented. By way of contrast, various normative pronouncements of the more outspoken sort are also included, in order to demonstrate the kind of reasoning used by 'defenders of the language' and the extent of their concern about developments.

1.6 Insecurity and hypercorrection

The divergence between standard and non-standard French, and the veneration with which the *bon usage* heritage is regarded, have made the normative language tradition a central component of francophone culture ('francophone',

not just ‘French’: some of the best-known commentators are from outside metropolitan France, the Belgians Maurice Grevisse and Joseph Hanse being cases in point).

The ordinary speaker of French, however, is in the unenviable position of making daily use of a range of forms which are officially proscribed or ‘blacklisted’. Moreover, such prominent components of the standard language as the past historic, the imperfect subjunctive, the agreement of the past participle, or even certain features of relative clauses, have little or no currency in contemporary colloquial usage, and are therefore to a greater or lesser extent unknown territory to a surprisingly large number of francophones.

The result, even among middle-class speakers, is a widespread sense of failure to measure up to the norm, a distinct uneasiness about grammar and grammarians, and a belief that French is a difficult language which they do not ‘speak properly’ – an odd belief on the face of it, given that those holding it are native francophones. Such preoccupations account, among other things, for the continued viability of the *chroniques de langage* in the press, for the proliferation on bookstalls of ‘guides to correct usage’, and for the fascination with the intricacies of spelling revealed each year in the annual international dictation contest ‘Les Dicos d’Or’, with its televised final.

Another consequence of this sense of insecurity is that, in their struggle to speak and write ‘correctly’, language users sometimes overshoot the mark, as it were, and produce forms which are actually distortions of the norm at which they are aiming. Examples of *hypercorrection* exist in English: the legendary Cockneys who pronounce the *h* in *honest*, or the large number of speakers who say ‘between you and I’ instead of ‘between you and me’ (on the assumption that, because ‘you and me’ is sometimes incorrect, it must always be incorrect). An example of a hypercorrect form in French is **je n’ai pas rien vu**, where eagerness to include **ne**, as required by the norm, leads to the insertion of **pas** as well – though this is not of course ‘correct’ when **rien** is present.

From time to time in the chapters that follow, examples will be given illustrating various hypercorrections and other classic *fautes de français* of which linguistically insecure francophones are sometimes ‘guilty’, as the purists would put it. Meanwhile, here are two representative comments in which speakers give expression to the feeling that the language they habitually use is ‘not proper French’, or ‘not good French’:

(a) l’imparfait du subjonctif . . . le passé simple . . . ce sont des temps qui sont d’une autre époque peut-être . . . mais qui sont . . . le vrai français . . . le bon français emploie ces temps-là. (59-year-old secretary)

(b) – Qu'est-ce que vous pensez de votre façon de parler le français?
– Oh, elle est sûrement très mauvaise [rires].
– Pourquoi?
– Ché pas . . . tous les Français parlent mal [rires], eh, c'est comme tout le monde . . . on parle toujours un français qui n'est pas très pur, hein.
– Vous croyez?
– Y a des fautes de français, oui, on fait des fautes. (33-year-old doctor) (Fischer 1987: 101, 167)

The position was aptly summed up by the linguist André Martinet, when he likened standard French grammar to a minefield through which speakers have to pick their way:

> Les Français n'osent plus parler leur langue parce que des générations de grammairiens, professionnels et amateurs, en ont fait un domaine parsemé d'embûches et d'interdits. (Martinet 1969: 29)

1.7 Grammatical variation and the foreign learner

Although brief reminders of standard usage are provided at various points in this book, it is in no way intended as a guide to *bon usage*, and in the event of uncertainty readers should consult one of the grammars listed in the References (Hawkins and Towell 1996, Judge and Healey 1983, Mansion 1952, Nott 1998, Price 1993).

Some general guidance can, however, be provided here for the foreign learner of French who is unsure which, if any, of the many non-standard forms presented he or she should actually use – as distinct from simply being able to recognize (though this in itself is an important part of competence in the language).

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the use or non-use of a particular form depends on the situational circumstances or setting: the fact that one may have 'heard French people say *x*' does not automatically make *x* appropriate at all times.

In writing, it is advisable always to keep to the norm, unless a deliberately colloquial, probably journalistic, effect is being sought. (This can be a risky undertaking for a non-native speaker, unless his/her proficiency in French is extremely high.) For example, **ne** should not be omitted: francophones may well not use it in conversation, but they are unlikely to leave it out in writing.

In spoken usage, foreign students of French should avoid forms classified as 'popular'. In English, the effect produced by non-anglophones saying *you wasn't* is generally just one of incompetence in English: they are unlikely to be taken for native Londoners, Brummies or Scousers, unless the rest of

their grammar (and pronunciation and vocabulary) is also impeccably ‘popular’. The same applies to *français populaire* forms.

But ‘familiar’ features can certainly be used if the circumstances are relaxed enough and the relationships between the speakers are appropriate: Do they belong to the same age group? Are they social equals or not? Are they friends, acquaintances or strangers? Do they use the **tu** form or the **vous** form to one another? ‘Ché pas’ for ‘je ne sais pas’ would probably not be helpful in a job interview: it might well give an unwanted impression of flippancy or even insolence. But it would be perfectly acceptable in a café conversation with friends. There is of course an unlimited range of possible situations. What if the non-francophone is not relaxing in a café, but is a guest at a rather formal dinner given by a hierarchical superior? In this case, familiar features would probably be more acceptable later in the proceedings than earlier: but basically the best practice is to adapt to the usage of other people who are present.

To be in a position to do this, it is important to have a clear idea of the level of ‘colloquialness’ of the forms in question and of the way in which the various grammatical areas are organized at that level. Judgements relating to particular situations should then follow without too much difficulty. But it is also important to be consistent: for example, omitting **ne** while at the same time forming questions by using inversion (see 2.2) would result in some extremely unnatural effects.

1.8 Further reading

The above is only a brief outline of the sociological aspects of grammatical variation. Several books are listed in the References which provide more information. Lodge (1993) gives a full account of the emergence of standard French. Chapter 2 of Sanders (1993) is a useful discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to register and language levels. Ager (1990), Ball (1997), Muller (1985), Offord (1990), Spence (1996) and Walter (1988) contain further information about the interaction between discourse situations and language structure.

In recent years, several excellent books specifically about the grammatical structure of spoken French have been published in France, though none is fully comprehensive. Gadet (1992), a handy paperback in the *Que sais-je?* series and written with the general public in mind, focuses on *français populaire* specifically: pronunciation and vocabulary are analysed as well as grammar, and there is some useful historical and social background. It replaces an earlier and in many ways less satisfactory *Que sais-je?* book with the same title (Guiraud 1965). Blanche-Benveniste (1997) and Gadet (1997) are more advanced treatments of conversational usage: various theoretical

issues are raised relating to norm and variation, and a number of areas of grammar and pronunciation are explored. Blanche-Benveniste (1990) contains quite technical, in-depth discussion of several grammatical issues. Both this and her 1997 book are informative about the findings of the group at the University of Provence (GARS: Groupe aixois de recherches en syntaxe) which, over the last two or three decades, has carried out valuable research into spontaneous spoken French.

To return for a moment to publications intended for the non-specialist reader, two books by Marina Yaguello (1991 and 1998) contain a series of astute and entertaining observations about trends in contemporary usage, including some that affect grammar. Leeman-Bouix (1994) is a lucid and spirited attack on the purist tradition by a convinced descriptivist.

Not to be neglected either are the two classic pioneering contributions to the study of colloquial French. Both appeared in the 1920s, though they are very different in nature. *Le Langage populaire*, by Henri Bauche (a writer of boulevard plays, not an academic) is straightforwardly but entertainingly descriptive. Some of the features he mentions may no longer be current (particularly as regards vocabulary), but they are always picturesque. Bauche operated within a framework of traditional assumptions. On the other hand, *La Grammaire des fautes*, by the Swiss linguist Henri Frei is, as its title implies, a scientifically oriented attempt to present popular French as a coherent linguistic system in its own right. (Frei's account is based on a detailed analysis of letters written by soldiers during the First World War).

1.9 Points about this book

Whether or not you choose actually to work through the exercises, they will provide you with a large number of additional examples of usage. Exercises marked with a dagger (†) have well-defined solutions, which are given in Appendix 1. Those not so marked are more open-ended and are mainly intended as tasks or projects, or as material for commentary.

Appendix 2 contains concise explanations of all the grammatical terms used (*antecedent*, *indirect object*, etc.). See Appendix 3 for a guided introduction to the International Phonetic Alphabet, as used for transcribing French.

Quoted examples come from a number of different sources, notably collections of unscripted conversations: port employees in Le Havre (coded FH), working-class and lower-middle-class residents of the Paris suburbs of Argenteuil (DF) and Ivry (IVR), youngsters contributing to a phone-in programme (LFM), or simply chatting (CR), interviews with Paris Metro workers (PB), conversational utterances noted by the author (RB), or used on radio or television (FI, FR3, TF1). Some colloquial written sources have also been utilized: novels, comic books, newspaper and magazine articles.

Other examples are from various published descriptions of spoken French. A key to all the codes will be found on pp. 234–6.

Normally, colloquial vocabulary items in examples are translated only if not listed in the Collins-Robert French–English dictionary. Unacceptable (ungrammatical) phrases or sentences are preceded by an asterisk (*). It is important to remember that sentences can be unacceptable in terms of the grammar of colloquial French, just as they can be unacceptable in terms of standard usage.