1 Defining the object of study

1.1 French is plural

What 'French' means seems intuitive: French is the language that French people learn in their childhood and that non-French people can acquire from them when learning French as a second language. A more specific definition going beyond this practical description and suitable for the purposes of this introduction to the structural properties of 'French', however, ends up either too restrictive or outright circular.

If, for instance, we stick to a geographic approach to 'the French language' by saying that it is the language spoken in France, we obviously leave out places like Belgium, Canada, Louisiana, and Switzerland, all of which have substantial French-speaking populations, as well as many other languages spoken within French borders. A definition based on speakers' social characteristics would not score any better. The educated elite in Montreal speak a different type of French than do educated people in Paris, and the same is presumably true for farmers in France, Nova Scotia, Switzerland, and other francophone countries and regions in the world. If one would try to pin down what unites varieties of French by simultaneously looking into social and dialectal differences, then the French spoken by diplomats at the United Nations and by a sizeable population of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa would fall out of our categories as well, since these varieties neither represent a single dialect, nor a single social group or **community of practice**. Choosing one spoken **genre** or **contextual style** over another as the defining structural criterion for 'the French language' would again be too restrictive: any advanced speaker of French as a foreign language would agree that the French read in grammar books or heard on the evening news is not necessarily the type of French encountered in other contexts in or outside the metropolitan area. Thus our intuitions tell us that dialect, social group, and situational context all play a role in what variety of French we speak and hear, but that enlarging the scope of the definition to include all these sources would also lead to a dead end: saying that irrespective of geographic, social, and contextual differences, French is the language spoken, written, and

understood by speakers who speak French would amount to stating the obvious: French is the language of those who speak French!

Another solution, in fact the most widely adopted, is to call 'French' every variety of the language that native speakers would perceive and accept as 'French'. While this seems sufficiently open-ended to encompass a wide range of spoken and written varieties, we must bear in mind that it reflects an external point of view. It reflects the point of view of teachers, politicians, social workers, researchers in linguistics, and many other observers of linguistic practices, and as such it can differ from what people living the same linguistic reality 'on the ground' would call their own language. What we, external observers, would qualify as 'Belgian' or 'southern' French can be commonly perceived as *liégeois* or *marseillais* by speakers who speak that local variety, even if the speakers would otherwise also agree to classify their own speech as a 'dialect' or 'variety' of French (see also section 1.4.1). Such discrepancies between global and local, external and internal perceptions, and labels of different 'tongues' are far from being in agreement, and therefore far from making it possible to come up with a single definition of the object of study that this book sets out to explore.

'French' in this book will be used as a shorthand to a complex linguistic reality 'on the ground', even though we adopt an external point of view when describing the many aspects of its structure. We will attempt to provide the reader with a glimpse into the rich world of dialectal, social, and situational variation in French together, and often in contrast, with the 'standard'.

The linguistic standard called *français standard* or *français de référence* 'standard French' has been in the making since the Middle Ages. It was codified in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and encouraged by the centralized nation-state at least since the founding of the Académie Française in 1635. But many other varieties of French have continued to flourish. We will consider these varieties as an organic part of 'French', knowing that it is only through the understanding of all their structural features and forms, variable or not, that one can comprehend what French means to all its speakers around the world.

We will be focusing on native, i.e. not French as a second language, varieties and, as a guiding thread, northern varieties of French spoken in France (henceforth, Metropolitan French). These geographical varieties or **dialects** can be historically tied to northern 'Gallo-Romance' (see Chapter 6) and have been undergoing constant change since the Middle Ages. One particular northern Gallo-Romance variety, itself a blend or **koiné** of many local varieties (see Lodge 2004), has spread through annexation, conquest, and colonization first to other parts of France, and then to many regions around the world. Thus what we, from an external point of view, will be calling 'French' is a foreign language for millions of language learners around the world, and a **heritage language**

for many descendants of former colonists or emigrants who now learn French as a foreign or second language, e.g. in Louisiana or the predominantly anglophone areas of Canada. The standardized and codified variety referred to as 'standard French' has become the official language in former French colonies around the world, such as the West African countries of Senegal, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire. Some varieties of French originated through colonization and immigration, especially in the New World, and then blended with other local and immigrant languages to give rise to entirely new and sometimes subsequently standardized language forms, as in the case of Haitian **Creole**, now the official language of Haiti. Varieties that did not achieve the status of a 'standard' nonetheless continue to show strong affiliation with French, their **lexifier language**: many of the structural properties of **French-based Creoles** (see section 1.3) are attested in other varieties of French, underscoring the assumption that despite prolonged contact with languages from Africa, creoles can be considered "legitimate offsprings of their lexifiers" (see Mufwene 2001:85).

Just like English words that refer to objects and persons that are inherently 'more than one' and that are not grammatically marked for plural (e.g. *luggage*, *family*), French is an essentially plural concept expressed in singular form. It is simultaneously a historical, geographic, and social construct that, in addition, shows situational-stylistic and individual variation. The problem, of course, is what to say about 'the' structure of French in light of this rich array of variation. What is common to all these varieties? What unites all these ways of speaking and writing? In trying to answer this question, we will first propose labeling these different, more or less easily distinguishable, types or varieties of French. Such a method is well known from studies of the history of French. What historians call northern Gallo-Romance was formed from Latin through countless small steps and changes over centuries, and yet historians refer to the chronological order of the formation of this group of varieties in terms of discrete periods, such as 'Old', 'Middle', and 'Modern' French (see Chapter 6). Throughout this book, we will apply a similar 'labeling technique' to geographic and social variation in the language. As we proceed, we will note that geographic diversity gave rise to many labels, such as northern and southern Metropolitan French, Canadian, Québécois, Cajun, Belgian, and Swiss French, all of which are commonly used in discussions and treatises about French. The French used in various social-stylistic settings will be called *français standard* 'standard French', *français familier* 'casual French', *français populaire* (working-class French), and *français vulgaire* ('vulgar French') depending on stylistic and social characteristics of the uses of the language in real-life situations. Although no more than convenient shorthand to a complex linguistic reality, these labels will be helpful in focusing on certain aspects of language use, e.g. **register**, genre, social group, etc.

1) Explain the analogy between the English words *luggage* and *information* and the pluralistic definition of 'French' advocated above.
2) Give a definition of the terms *community of practice*, *koiné*, and *lexifier language*.

1.2 Prescriptivism and the idea of 'standard' French

The pluralistic conception of French in this book contrasts sharply with a more monolithic view – often depicted in essays and treatises on French – which posits the 'standard' language as the only publicly acceptable language variety. According to this 'ideology of the standard', as linguists propose to call it (see Milroy & Milroy 1985), standard French is the indivisible *trésor* 'treasury' or *patrimoine* 'heritage' of the French nation that should be preserved by all the people. While the cohesive force of a common language is not to be doubted, we will see that the above concept of standard French presupposes an imaginary, ethnically, and socially homogeneous group of speakers. National identity in France is so closely tied to this concept of French viewed as a mutually shared and 'cherished' standard language that one can probably go so far as to declare with Posner (1997:48) that being French is "not a question of genetics but of cultural allegiance". In simple terms, cultural allegiance means that as long as people abide by their obligation to use standard French, they are considered 'good citizens' of the country (see below). The roots of such a view reach far back in the history of the country, and leads us to the discussion of linguistic **prescriptivism**.

Prescriptivism can be broadly defined as an authoritative way of expressing views about the language. One expression of linguistic prescriptivism has always been mockery: from at least the twelfth century, speakers and writers felt that they would be the object of ridicule if they strayed from the language of Ile-de-France, the region around Paris, home to the ruling social elite surrounding the French king. By the end of the thirteenth century the long arm of royal power, centered in Paris, extended the use of the king's dialect to other parts of the country. The Hundred Years War (1337–1453) encouraged the development of a sense of nation, of 'us' (the French) against 'them' (the English); with that came a sense of Frenchness which extended beyond the local manors and provinces in the king's possession. At the same time, the law, especially in northern France, was essentially a local law, expressed through an oral tradition called *coutumes* 'customs'. In the fifteenth century the kings made several changes to the legal system that increased the sense of a central power, and with that the sense of a commonly shared language. First, new parliaments

(law courts) were established throughout the southern half of the country. Following their establishment, oral legal codes were to be written down and approved by the Parliament of Paris. This process took more than a century to spread throughout France. As a third step, starting cautiously but increasing in scope and authority, a series of royal *ordonnances* 'royal decrees' required that French be the language of the courts. This process culminated in the Ordonnances de Villers-Cotterêts (1539), which decreed that all legal activity in the country be conducted in "*langage maternel françois*" 'the maternal French language', an ambiguous phrase interpreted by the courts in an unambiguous manner: the king's French. Although French law was not entirely unified until the French Revolution, the principle of a central legal authority, expressed in a single language, the language of the legal community in Paris, was set. This had lasting implications for the formation of a 'standard' form of written and oral expression in what later became the modern French nation-state.

It was, nonetheless, hard to talk about a 'standard' language in times when there existed no grammars, i.e. books laying out rules defining what language variety should be shared by all speakers. In the later Middle Ages some grammatical descriptions of French were written in England, but the first French grammar appeared only in 1531. It was written by Jacques Dubois, a medical doctor from Picardy. The next grammar was written by Louis Meigret (1550), a lawyer from Lyon. The provincial origins of these authors were transparent in the linguistic forms (sounds, words, and expressions) that they prescribed, so their books were not accepted as defining a standard for all, especially not for the Parisian elite. It was not until the seventeenth century that linguistic forms considered as 'standard' received a meticulous description, for instance in dictionaries written by Nicot (1530–1600), Richelet (1631–1698), and Furetière (1619–1688), as well as the dictionary of the Académie Française, published in 1694. Grammars by Maupas (1600–1625), Oudin (1595–1653), Irson (1650–1700), and Régnier-Desmarais (1632–1713) represent the same intent to provide a thorough documentation of the standard. Commentaries on the French language by Malherbe (1555–1628), Vaugelas (1585–1650), and others, sometimes in agreement with the grammarians, sometimes not, completed this work. Written documentation of a shared linguistic standard had the advantage of facilitating communication in a linguistically diverse country. But the work of some authors spreading the newly forming standard quickly went beyond concerns of mutual intelligibility. Many of them, especially commentators (*remarqueurs)* like Vaugelas, advocated what some linguists call a 'supernorm' (Garmadi 1981:65), i.e. linguistic forms selected because they matched "the esthetic or socio-cultural ideals of social groups holding prestige and power in society". Thus besides its indispensible communicative functions, 'standard French' is

also a social phenomenon reflecting the most 'valued' ways of speaking and writing the language. Thus there was nothing inherently better or 'more correct' in the way of pronouncing certain words in Gallo-Romance varieties of Metropolian French rather than as advocated by the sixteenth-century grammarians Dubois or Meigret. What made the 'linguistic ways and means' of these grammarians less desirable for many is that they did not reflect the use of the language by those groups of the social elite that were posited as models to emulate for all other social groups of French society.

As the linguistic norm, roughly the king's and the royal court's French, was not yet the focal point of education, the production of grammars, dictionaries, and commentaries initially had limited impact. The goal of the educational system, controlled by the Church until the late eighteenth century, was not to propagate the ways in which the urban social elite was speaking and writing in Paris, but to teach students the Latin that made religious texts accessible to them. At the end of the seventeenth and through the eighteenth century, numerous reformers of the educational system proposed that the study of French, together with the disciplines of modern science, be given a more prominent place in the curriculum. Major change in education would not occur until the Revolution, when the newly formed Committee on Public Instruction stated that mastery of the national language would be the most important goal of education, and launched a contest to select the one elementary grammar book to be used in every school. The norms of French were consequently enforced through national examinations such as the *baccalauréat* and the *aggrégation*, both established in 1808, and through the fittingly named *écoles normales* 'normal schools' (teacher training colleges). In these schools, teachers learned to speak and teach the officially-supported standard variety of French. This centralized, universal teacher education was enforced through school inspection: regular visits to schools by civil servants whose role was to ensure that the goals of the national elementary education system were being met.

It was, however, not until elementary education became free, mandatory, and delivered by the French nation-state in the 1880s that the linguistic variety set as 'the standard' was to reach almost every young person in the country. Bilingualism and **diglossia**, that is, equal or asymmetric competence in at least two languages, was therefore common until that point. Students spoke one language, often referred to as ***patois***, a derogatory label for local dialect, and did their best to speak the 'national standard' at school. The penalties for not using standard French at school were often severe, ranging from physical punishment to mockery and public humiliation. Occasionally, literary texts preserve the memory of such painful encounters with the standard. The first day in school of the main character, Philomène, born in a mountainous region in south-west France in the novel *Les cailloux bleus* of Christian Signol (1984) is depicted in the following excerpt:

Elle s'approcha du poêle de fonte situé au fond de la classe, entre deux meubles aux étagères chargées de livres, en ouvrit la porte, glissa les bûches dans le four après avoir attisé les braises.
– *"Quo rounflo" – dit-elle en revenant s'asseoir.*
La mère [religieuse] se retourna brusquement et son visage prit un air sévère.
– *Ici, Philomène, il est interdit de parler patois. On apprend et on parle le français qui est la langue de notre pays. Tu comprends?*
– *Oui, murmura Philomène, tandis que les larmes lui montaient aux yeux à l'idée d'apprendre une langue qu'elle parlait à peine.*

'She went up to the cast iron stove which stood at the back of the classroom between two heavy bookcases stuffed with books. She opened the door, and slipped the logs on the fire after reviving the dying embers.
– "Quo rounflo" – she said as she returned to her seat.
The nun turned sharply and glowered.
– "Here, Philomène, speaking *patois* is forbidden. One learns and one speaks French, the language of our country. Do you understand?"
– "Yes", murmured Philomène, as her eyes filled with tears at the thought of learning a language that she hardly understood.' [All translations by the authors of this book.]

Prescriptive attitudes and educational methods were exported and other varieties of French (e.g. Canadian, Cajun) and French-based Creoles were likewise scorned.

But in spite of all the efforts to eradicate regional variation over the course of several centuries, French has remained plural. This is especially true if variation in French is considered globally. Although some studies suggest that most northern dialects of Metropolitan French are losing their local dialectal characteristics and switching, or as linguists say "leveling in the direction of the standard" (see Armstrong 2001), there is still ample evidence of geographic and social variation. In fact the leveling of different language varieties does not necessarily preclude variation; on the contrary, it can also be fueled by linguistic variation. Out of a large pool of variable features in French new standards are forming, as a region like Quebec has already created its own local norms, and the issue of a *norme pluricentrique* 'multi-centric norm' of French has come up in countries such as Belgium and Switzerland (Pöll 2001, Singy 1996).

1) List the major historical events in the formation of a linguistic standard in French, and elaborate on the communicative and social functions of 'standard French'.
2) Why are grammar books written and what are they used for? What happens to languages for which we do not have grammar books? Do you know of any such cases?
3) Give a definition of the terms *prescriptivism*, *diglossia*, *patois*.

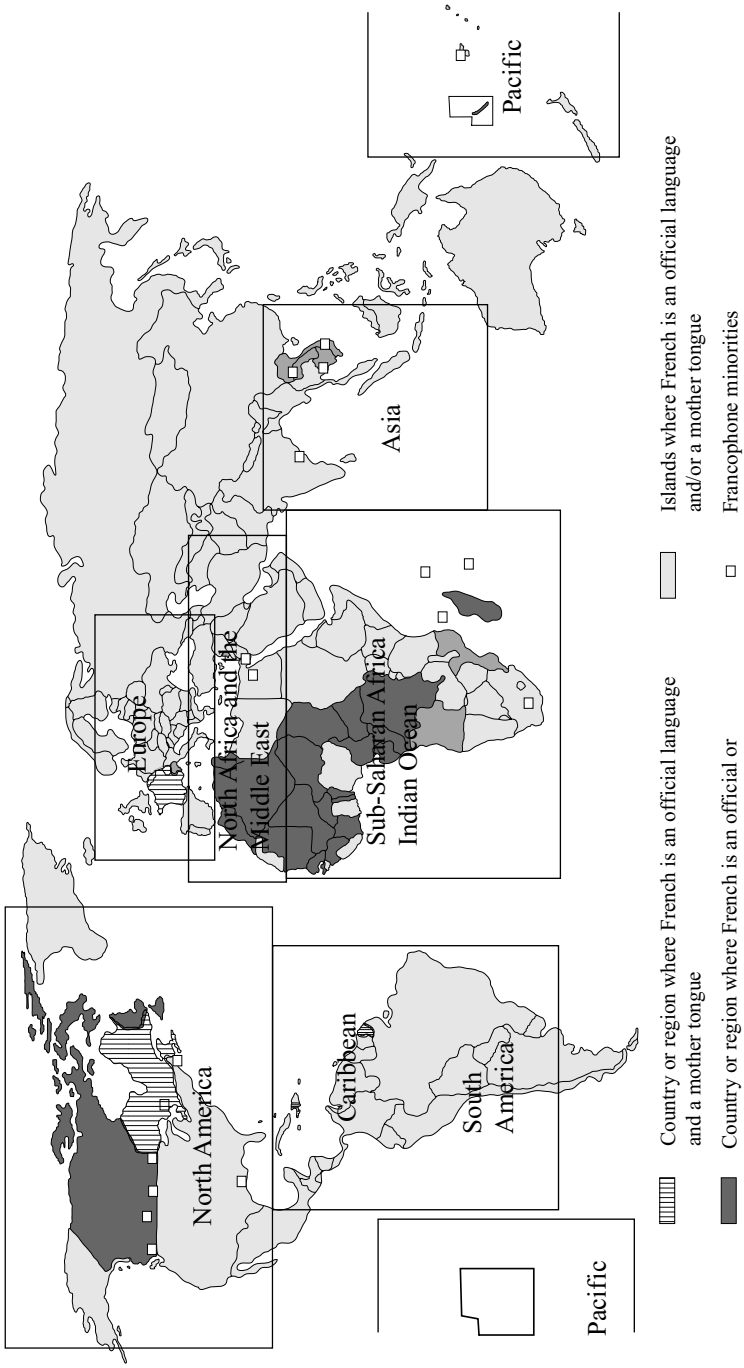

Figure 1.1 Map of francophone countries

1.3 Francophonie

The idea of multiple standards brings us to the topic of French around the world. The French language has spread beyond France and Europe through conquests and colonization; it is today an international **vehicular language** or ***lingua franca***.

French is spoken natively by an estimated 80 million people in the world. It is ranked eleventh among the most widely spoken languages according to the Summer Institute of Linguistics *Ethnologue* Survey (Grimes 1996). The number of French-speaking people is closer to 169 million, if so-called secondary speakers, or people who are not born as native speakers but use French as their regular or primary means of communication, are also counted. As opposed to natively spoken languages like Mandarin Chinese that are concentrated in a single geographical location, French as an official native language is spoken on five different continents: Europe (44% of French speakers), the Americas (7.6%), Africa (46.3%), Asia (1.8%), and Oceania (0.3%). The largest number of native francophone speakers, about 71 million, lives in Europe, and most of them are in France. Approximately 45% of Belgians and 20% of the Swiss are also native speakers of French. In the Americas, the largest francophone community is in Quebec, Canada, representing about 5.9 million speakers (Canadian Census 2001). The rest of the francophone communities in the Americas are three of the DOMs (*Départements d'Outre Mer* 'Overseas Departments'): the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guyana in the Caribbean. The state of Louisiana in the United States counted about 200,000 speakers of French in 2000 (US Census), and roughly 23% of the population spoke French on the island of Haiti in 1997 (estimate of the Agence de la Francophonie).

The largest francophone population in Africa is concentrated in the western Sub-Saharan regions of the continent, with French as an official or administrative language in more than ten different countries from Mauritania and Senegal to Gabon and the Congo (see Figure 1.1). In the Indian Ocean, the islands of Madagascar, Seychelles, and Mauritius stand out as the largest francophone communities, with about 23% of the local population (18.4 million people). In North Africa, French has the status of a 'privileged' foreign language, and several decades after decolonization it remains the dominant language of higher education for roughly 33 million people. About 57% of the inhabitants of Algeria (French colony 1848–1962), 41% of Moroccans, and 64% of Tunisians (under French Protectorate 1912–1956 and 1881–1955, respectively) can speak French. The largest francophone community in the Middle East is in Lebanon (under French mandate 1920–1941), totalling about 1.5 million speakers. In Asia, Vietnam and Cambodia have roughly 375,000 francophones.

The worldwide influence of the language today is supported through the actions of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, which was

founded in the 1980s and which aims to unite and coordinate the actions of French-speaking countries around the world. The word *francophonie* was first proposed by the geographer Onésime Reclus (1837–1916), a patriot and fervent advocate of French colonial rule who wished to promote in his writings the more humanistic aspects of colonialism, namely the cultural, linguistic, and demographic ties between France and its colonies. Author of numerous books on French colonial Africa and Asia, in his book *Un grand destin commence* 'The start of a great destiny', published in 1917, Reclus argued for the need to reinforce what he called the "ties of solidarity" between the French colonists and the indigenous populations through the common use of standard French. He saw the spread of the standard language as capable of transcending ethnic and racial lines and making the people belong to a single entity: *la langue fait le peuple* (*lingua gentem facit*) 'language makes the people', he argued. The central role of language in reinforcing historical ties between francophone countries served as a founding principle for the movement of *francophonie* later in the twentieth century. Forty-eight countries and two provinces in Canada are permanent members of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, which also includes four associated countries: Albania, Andorra, Greece, and Macedonia. French is at least a minor language spoken in all states, but the major language of only some of its permanent member states. Ten additional countries from Eastern Europe are invited observers at its summits that are held every two years in one of the member states: Armenia, Austria, Croatia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* promotes and supervises scientific, economical, and international legal cooperation between its permanent and associated member states.

1) List at least three countries or regions where French is spoken natively in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.
2) What is *francophonie* and where does the concept come from?
3) What languages, besides French, are used as *lingua francas* in the world today? Is it true that a *lingua franca* should be easy to learn for foreigners? Explain.

1.4 Variation 'omnibus'

1.4.1 Geographical variation

Geographical variation in languages is typically analyzed in terms of **dialects**. A dialect is a variant of a language spoken in a certain, usually large, geographic location. Smaller areas within a given dialect have sub-dialects, sharing