1 Introduction

The skill of using language is usually taken for granted. When we mention the use of language, most people assume we mean its 'correct' use. Perhaps this happens because they generally hold strong opinions about this subject; just take a look at the continuously raging debates in newspaper letter columns about issues such as grammar, spelling and punctuation. However, the use of language involves a whole lot more than the correct implementation of rules. Ever since our early ancestors developed language – a subject we still know relatively little about – it has not only been used to exchange information, but also to convey feelings and evoke emotions. Actually, the way in which we use words says a lot about how we view ourselves and others. For example, speaking a dialect or using particular words can show a sense of belonging. This ability to use language sets human beings apart from other living creatures. Studying it helps us to understand and can also help us to learn a language, for example German, the subject of this book.

Language study can be separated into different components, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics to name but a few. We will introduce many of these subjects in this book, but it is not our purpose to provide a general introduction to linguistics (see, for example, Fromkin *et al.*, 2003; O'Grady *et al.*, 1997). Instead, our aim is to introduce advanced learners of German to the methods and meta-language (the language used to describe language) developed by linguists, and then apply these to the study of German. Among other things, we hope that students will thereby discover new ways of thinking *about* the German language. Plus, many of the subjects we will be dealing with here, including topics such as language variation, code-switching and the various components which make up language, will also be relevant for the study of other languages.

Some of the questions we will be dealing with may at first sight look simple. For example, what is the German language and where is it spoken? However, the answers are not always straightforward. The German language is very diverse and there are great differences between different varieties of spoken German as well as strong similarities with other related languages (such as English, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages). These variations are geographical, but, as we will see, there are other types of variation which have to do with the function of language (the aims of the speaker) as well as the formality of the situation in which language is used. Even though there are great differences between varieties

of German, there is still a strong feeling among German speakers that a single uniform entity, which we can refer to as 'the German language', exists.

An understanding of how language works is not the only use of linguistics. Language is not just the medium we use to *communicate* with others – it is also the tool with which we *think* about ourselves, other people and the world in which we live. Have you ever wondered how much thinking you can do without language? How can you describe your ideas, friends or surroundings without resorting to words? Moreover, the particular language with which we do our thinking – whether English, French or Japanese – is central to our sense of who we are in cultural terms. Indeed, one of the main differences between English-, French- and Japanese-speaking cultures is not merely the fact that different languages are used; it is that each of those languages permits, sometimes even encourages, different ways of thinking about the world.

It follows, then, that if we want to understand something about the way in which German speakers think about themselves and the world in which *they* live, a useful place to begin is by looking at the language they use in order to do so. Again, this is because the German language is not simply the medium via which German speakers communicate with one another, it is closely bound up with who they are culturally. In short: the study of language is also the study of culture. With the help of this book, it is therefore hoped that students will not only find new ways of exploring the German *language*, but also new ways of thinking and talking about German-speaking *cultures*.

1.1 Outline of the book

Exploring the German Language is divided into three sections: part I, 'The history and geography of German'; part II, 'The structures of German'; and part III, 'The German language in use'.

1.1.1 Part I: The history and geography of German

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the historical development of German. We might begin by asking: why study the history of the language? Is it not possible to learn German by concentrating on the way it is used today? On one level, the answer is yes. You can no doubt acquire German without knowing very much about where it comes from. But you can learn so much more if you have a basic understanding of how the language has grown over the years. Why is it, for example, that the English words 'father' and 'mother' are so like the German *Vater* and *Mutter*? In what ways did National Socialism or the division of Germany affect the use of the language in the twentieth century? These are all questions which can only be answered by considering the German language in its historical context. Moreover, the history of German is also the history of the people who speak it. Exploring the development of the language

is, therefore, an interesting way of discovering more about the customs and traditions of German-speaking cultures. Contemporary language debates such as the German spelling reform, sexist language and linguistic purism will also be considered.

Chapter 3 approaches German from a slightly different perspective: geography. If you are going to learn a foreign language, then it is helpful to know exactly where it is spoken. Most learners of German are aware that the language they are studying can be used in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. But it is generally less well known that there are German-speaking individuals and groups in France, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Israel and many other countries around the world. This does not, however, mean that the language enjoys the same status in each of those places. Students need therefore to appreciate how and why the use of German would be likely to provoke very different reactions in parts of Italy or Belgium than in, say, Poland or Israel – reactions which are invariably linked to the historical issues discussed in chapter 2.

1.1.2 Part II: The structures of German

Chapters 4 and 5 provide an introduction to pronunciation. For most learners of German, the importance of being able to *speak* – and not just write – the language has increased markedly over the years. Most university courses now place considerable emphasis on oral tasks performed in German, such as presentations, summaries or interpreting. Clearly, therefore, it makes sense to spend time and effort on the acquisition of correct pronunciation. Poor pronunciation can lead to all kinds of misunderstandings, and good pronunciation is one of the main means by which we create an impression upon the people with whom we are conversing. These two chapters are therefore dedicated to helping students understand more about the way in which German is pronounced. They describe the sounds of German in detail and provide practical guidance on the kinds of problems typically experienced by non-native speakers. Moreover, chapter 5 shows how differences in German and English patterns of intonation can account for the occasional intercultural misunderstandings which may occur between speakers of the two languages. This is because, in some situations, German and English have different ways of using intonation to express such sentiments as politeness and friendliness.

The next two chapters discuss a different aspect of language structure, namely grammar. Chapter 6 concentrates on the structure of German words while chapter 7 deals with the structure of German sentences. 'Grammar' is a familiar and frequently rather ominous concept where students of foreign languages are concerned. The extent to which it is studied explicitly varies according to trends in language teaching methodology and the preferences of individual teachers and students. But there comes a point at which most learners realise that they need to know more about grammar. Sadly, what many students say is that they would like to spend time on the subject, but often have difficulty

understanding the terminology used in the grammar books available to them. Once again, the problem would appear to be one of meta-language. As you will see in chapters 6 and 7, the way in which linguists talk about grammar is not necessarily the same as the approach taken by writers of grammar books, but there is considerable overlap. After reading these two chapters you will therefore hopefully feel more readily equipped with the specialist vocabulary needed to use grammar books and other reference works such as dictionaries.

Having looked at the grammar of words in chapter 6 (and that of sentences in chapter 7), chapter 8 turns to the meaning of German words. It may seem rather strange to spend a whole chapter discussing meaning. Surely words mean what they mean! But consider what it is like translating a passage from German to English. Quite apart from the fact that the grammatical structures of the two languages may differ, there are many situations where the most direct translation of a word is not always appropriate. Chapter 8 takes a look at the relationship between words and the objects, concepts and ideas to which they refer. Importantly, it shows how that relationship need not necessarily be the same across languages. Thus, one of the most challenging aspects of translation stems from the fact that words which appear to have the same meaning are often used in different ways in different languages.

1.1.3 Part III: The German language in use

All learners know that, in practice, speaking or writing a foreign language involves using structures such as sounds, words and sentences simultaneously. Having said this, the study of language does not end with the analysis of sentences. Part III therefore considers the way in which German works 'beyond the level of the sentence'. In other words, it looks at what happens to the language when it is used in real situations in the real world.

Chapter 9 deals with two relatively new areas in linguistics both of which explore meaning in context. Take, for example, the statement *Mir ist kalt*. If you were to translate this literally, you would no doubt come up with something like: 'I am cold.' Yet there are many situations in which this sentence could mean something different. If you are sitting in a friend's house and it is snowing outside, *Mir ist kalt* might be a polite request to close a door or even to switch up the heating. Clearly, therefore, the meaning of a word or sentence can change considerably according to the context in which it is used. The second half of chapter 9 looks at a further area where the meaning of German very much depends on context, namely, in written texts. This section shows that it is not only sentences which have to be structured in a certain way, but that there is also such a thing as a 'grammar of texts'. The reader will therefore be introduced to the ways in which texts need to be organised if they are going to make sense, something which is a great help when writing essays.

Finally, chapter 10 explores another important aspect of language in the real world: how and why different people *vary* the kind of German they use. This

chapter brings together every other aspect of the language discussed so far. It shows how the use of the many dialects of German is closely related to the historical and geographical factors outlined in chapters 2 and 3. We also see that, when talking about different styles of German, such as standard/dialect, written/spoken, formal/informal, we need to draw on the technical terminology introduced in part II of the book. In this way, we can describe the pronunciation, grammar and meaning of these varieties much more accurately.

Perhaps most significantly, however, chapter 10 demonstrates how the study of the German language is also the study of German-speaking cultures. Thus, we explore not only the ways in which different styles of German are *used* by different speakers but also how these may be *interpreted* by others. This takes us back to a point which was mentioned earlier – the German language is central to the way in which German speakers think about themselves, others and the world in which they live. Moreover, we discover that what sometimes distinguishes German- from English-speaking cultures is not just the fact that two different languages are used – but that the two languages may also be used and interpreted *differently* by their respective speakers.

1.2 Using this book

This book can be read by anyone who is interested in finding out more about the German language and/or used as a textbook to accompany an introductory course in German linguistics. Either way, it has been specifically designed for readers who have little or no knowledge of linguistics, in general, or German linguistics, in particular.

We have tried not to use any technical terminology without explaining it first. Whenever a new term is used for the first time, it appears in bold type. If, however, you come across a technical word or phrase which occurred earlier in the text, then you can refer to the index which will guide you to other pages where the same term is used in a different context.

Another feature of the book is the group of exercises at the end of each chapter. In many cases, the exercises specifically request that you go back to a particular section of a chapter, or look at a map or table. You should not feel obliged to do all the exercises in one sitting.

Finally, at the end of each chapter there is a list of sources and recommended reading. Here we have included those texts to which we have referred in detail when writing this book and/or those which we think are particularly useful for readers who may want to explore certain topics in greater depth. All other references are listed in the bibliography.

PART I

The history and geography of German

2 The German language past and present

In order to understand more about a language in general, it is helpful to look at its history. There is much more to that language than just the variety that is used today, and understanding historical changes and the links with other languages can inform us about the way that a language works; it allows us to see where the language has come from and the changes it has undergone. We know that all languages change over time, both on an individual level and in relation to other languages, and we can interpret these changes in the light of what was happening in a society during these times.

One of the most exciting things about learning a foreign language is the way in which we might discover similarities between that language and our mother tongue. We can use these links to make sense of words and ideas which we have never come across before. This is because languages do not exist in isolation: take the English word 'father', for example. It is easy to see that 'father' is somehow related to the German *Vater*. Even though the two words are spelled and pronounced differently, they are obviously still quite similar. Now consider the Spanish word *padre* and the French *père*. Again, there can be no denying that the word for 'father' is somehow related in all four languages, but the extent of that relationship differs. In terms of their similarity, English and German are closer to one another than to Spanish and French. On the other hand, none of these four languages would appear to have very much in common with Japanese where the word for '(my) father' is *chichi*. Although this is just one example, there are many others which show systematic correspondences between languages like English and German and illustrate that they are related.

It may be useful to think of languages as belonging to families. Languages, like people, have parents, as well as sisters and cousins. In many cases, they even produce their own offspring. Some have a relatively short life-span, whilst others grow to be very old. As we mentioned, languages are constantly changing – at each stage in their life they look and behave somewhat differently. Thus, in the same way that the 5-year-old girl bears little resemblance to the 65-year-old grandmother she later becomes, so, the German learned by students today does not look or sound very much like the Gothic or Old High German dialects from which it is nonetheless derived.

So where does German come from? What is its relation to other languages? How and why has German changed over the centuries? In order to answer these questions, we need to take a brief look at the *history* of the language. We will

begin by piecing together the biography and family tree which is unique to German, before describing how the language has developed into the variety which is used today.

2.1 The origins of German

Officially speaking, the German language is approximately 1,250 years old. This is, of course, only a very rough estimate and is based on the discovery of the first documents in German, which are thought to date from around AD 750. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the development of a written version of any language almost always follows a lengthy period of spoken usage, and it is known that people had been speaking German or closely related dialects for many years before the language was ever recorded in writing. The real origins of German are therefore to be found considerably earlier. Indeed, in order to understand the relationship between German and other languages, it is necessary to go as far back as 4000 BC.

2.1.1 The Indo-European family of languages

German belongs to what is known as the **Indo-European** family of languages. The relationship between the various Indo-European tongues can be best represented in the form of a family tree (see fig. 2.1). This is a very simplified version and there exists some disagreement among historical linguists as to the exact grouping of languages.

From fig. 2.1, it can be seen that the Indo-European family consists of a number of different language groups, for example Germanic, Celtic, Romance, Slavonic, etc. We can therefore begin to appreciate that even though German, English, Spanish and French are all part of the same family, the relationships between them are not equidistant. English and German are **Germanic** languages, while Spanish and French are members of the **Romance** group. This means that whereas German and English might be thought of as cousins, German and Spanish (or French) are more like second cousins. Japanese, on the other hand, does not feature among the Indo-European languages at all: it belongs to a completely different family of languages found in south-east Asia, namely the Altaic group.

Languages are spoken by people and the history of a language is, therefore, directly tied up with the movements of its speakers. One of the things which has fascinated scholars is the exact geographical origin of the people who first used Indo-European languages. There has been considerable dispute, but one of the theories put forward is that the earliest speakers were a nomadic group known as the Kurgans (named after their traditional burial mounds), who lived in southern Russia around 4000 BC. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Kurgans then migrated to the Danube area by 3500 BC, arriving in the Adriatic

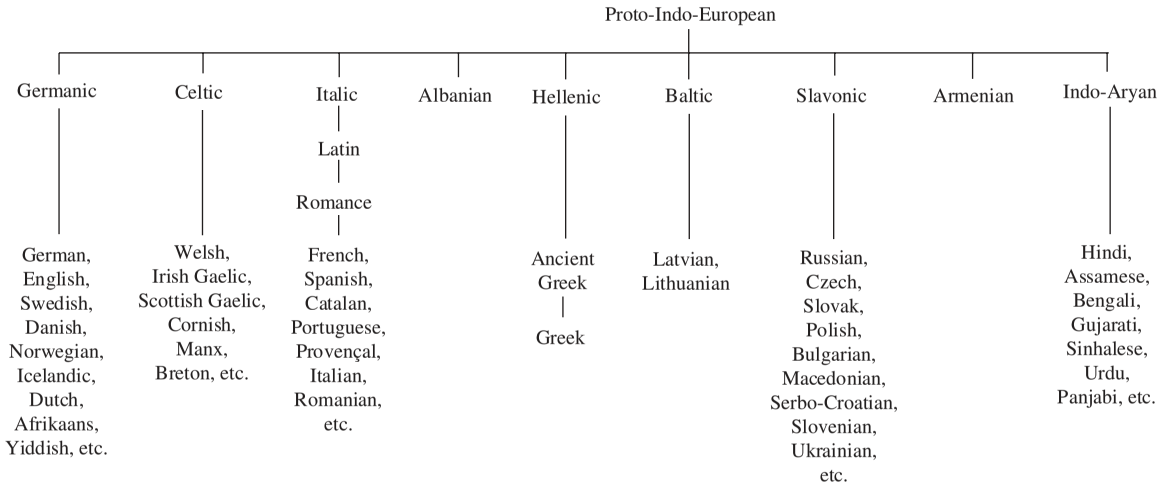

Fig 2.1 *The Indo-European family tree (adapted from Barbour and Stevenson, 1990: 24; Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003: 529)*

region around 2000 BC. There are no direct sources which can prove where this language originated from, but by comparing similar vocabulary items across different 'offspring' of the Indo-European languages, we can try to piece together where they came from. Looking at words for animals, plants and climate as well as tools which the descendants of Indo-European have in common can help point to the origin of the ancestor.

It was not until the sixteenth century AD that scholars seriously began to piece together the links between the sounds, grammar and vocabulary of the many different varieties of the Indo-European family. But once the systematic and scientific study of these languages began, linguists concluded that all Indo-European languages probably originated from a single parent form which they called **Proto-Indo-European (PIE)**, which was spoken around 5,000–6,000 years ago. It is, of course, impossible to state with any certainty that anyone ever spoke a discrete language called PIE; in fact, we are probably dealing with a group of related dialects. But whatever the case, there is documented evidence showing that by 2000–1000 BC, PIE had fragmented into a number of other languages such as Greek, Armenian and Indo-Iranian.

Even allowing for the fact that PIE may never have existed as a separate variety, there are a number of features which historical linguists and philologists believe were typical of this language or dialect group. Three of these are worth looking at briefly, given their relevance to the study of modern German.

First, it is possible to say something about the sounds of PIE. For example, there were **vowels** which can be classed into different groups such as short and long monophthongs and diphthongs, and a number of **consonants**. Many of these consonants are still present in German such as: 'p', 't', 'k', 'b', 'd', 'g'. An important feature of pronunciation which has been retained in modern-day German is called **vowel gradation**, which is responsible for vowel changes in verbs, for example *werfen*, *warf*, *geworfen*.

Second, it seems that **stress** was able to fall on any syllable of any word (with some limitations), giving the pronunciation of PIE a particularly musical quality. We shall see later how a similar pattern was retained in the Romance languages, but not in Germanic varieties such as English and German.

Third, PIE was a highly **inflected** language. This means that grammatical categories were expressed by changing the structure of words, particularly by adding endings. For example, there was a complex system of noun **declension** and verb **conjugation**. Nouns could be counted in three ways (singular, dual and plural), there were three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), and no less than eight cases (nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative, ablative, locative and instrumental). Verbs, on the other hand, had three numbers (like nouns), four moods (indicative, imperative, subjunctive and optative), three voices (active, passive and middle) and six simple tenses (present, imperfect, aorist, perfect, pluperfect and future). (Simple tenses are those constructed with one verb only, e.g. *ich ging*, as opposed to compound tenses, which require an extra, auxiliary verb, e.g. *ich bin gegangen*.)