● *from . . . through, from . . . to*: There are some other differences in prepositional usage, such as the use of *from X through Y* in <AmE> to clarify that a period includes both X and Y (see 163):

<AmE>: The tour lasted *from July through* August.
<BrE>: The tour lasted *from July to* August (inclusive). [In <BrE> the word *inclusive* is sometimes added to make clear that the period includes the last-mentioned period, here August.]

On other differences *see* the listing in the index under <AmE> and <BrE>.

Levels of usage: formal and informal English <formal>, <informal>

45 We turn now to the way English varies not according to geographical differences, but according to differences in the relation between speaker (or writer) and hearer (or reader). We can refer to these as **levels of usage** (see 15–16).

Formal language is the type of language we use publicly for some serious purpose, for example in official reports, business letters, regulations, and academic writing. Formal English is nearly always <written>, but exceptionally it is used in <speech>, for example in formal public speeches or lectures. As an example of formal English, here is an extract from a book review:

The approach is remarkably interdisciplinary. Behind its innovations is the author's fundamental proposal that the creativity of language derives from multiple parallel generative systems linked by interface components. This shift in basic architecture makes possible a radical reconception of mental grammar and how it is learned. As a consequence, the author is able to reintegrate linguistics with philosophy of mind, cognitive and developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and computational linguistics.

Informal language (also called 'colloquial') is the language of ordinary conversation, of personal letters, and of private interaction in general. Here is another extract from an informal conversation <in AmE> (see further 19 and 42):

[A] So Larry did you manage to get any sleep beside Michelle's crying?
[B] I didn't hear a thing.
[A] Really.
[B] Yeah.
[A] God, I can't believe it.
[B] I didn't hear a thing.
[A] Well, it must have been around three o'clock this morning. Suddenly she couldn't sleep.
[B] Really?
[A] Yeah, I think she's getting a cold.
[B] What did she do?
[A] Every time I started to fall asleep she'd go Mommy, Mommy.
[B] Nope, I didn't hear a thing.
[A] Well, that's good.
[B] I can sleep through a hurricane, I guess.

Spoken language like this is typically informal, but informal English is now used more and more also in written communication of a popular kind, for example in newspapers, magazines, advertisements and popular fiction.

An example of the formality scale

46 The difference between <formal> and <informal> usage is best seen as a scale, rather than as a simple 'yes or no' distinction. Consider the following example:

There are many friends to whom one would hesitate to entrust one's own children. <formal> [1]

This is towards the formal end of the scale for a number of reasons:

● Use of *there are*, which (unlike the less formal *there's*) maintains the plural concord with *many friends* as subject (see 547–9).

● Use of *many friends* itself, rather than the more informal *a lot of friends* or *lots of friends* (see 72–3).

● Use of the initial preposition to introduce a relative clause (*to whom*), rather than a construction with a final preposition *who(m) . . . to*. (Compare, for example, the formal *the firm for which she works* with the informal *the firm she works for – see* 686–94.)

● Related to the preceding feature is the use of *whom*, which is itself a rather formal pronoun (see 686–94) compared with *who – for* example, in *Whom did they meet?* compared with *Who did they meet?*

● Use of the generic personal pronoun *one* (see 98), rather than the more informal use of generic *you*.

47 If we replaced all these features of [1] by informal equivalents, the sentence would run as follows [1a]:

There's lots of friends who you would hesitate to entrust your own children to. <informal> [1a]

However, it is significant that this sentence seems very unidiomatic. The reason is that a translation from one variety to another, like translation from one language to another, cannot be treated as a mechanical exercise. In practice, informal English prefers its own typical features, which include, for example, contracted forms of verbs (there's rather than there is, etc.), omission of the relative pronoun who/whom/that, and informal vocabulary rather than more formal vocabulary such as entrust. As an example of informal English, [1b] is a more natural-sounding sentence than [1a]:

There's lots of friends you'd never trust with your own children.   [1b]

However, we could make more lexical changes to increase or decrease the formality of this sentence. For example, replacing children by kids would make the sentence even more informal:

There's lots of friends you'd never trust with your own kids.   [1c]

On the other hand, the following, with its use of there are and would, is a more formal variant:

There are lots of friends you would never trust with your own children.   [1d]

It is therefore possible to place the above sentences (leaving aside [1a]) on a scale from most to least formal in the following order:

There are many friends to whom one would hesitate to entrust one's own children.   [1]

There are lots of friends you would never trust with your own children.   [1d]

There's lots of friends you'd never trust with your own children.   [1b]

There's lots of friends you'd never trust with your own kids.   [1c]

However, it is difficult to be precise about degrees of formality and informality, so that we often have to be content with relative phrases such as <rather formal> or <rather informal>.

48 One reason for this vagueness is that formality, as a scale, can be applied on the one hand to aspects of the situation in which communication takes place, and on the other hand to features of language which correlate with those aspects. There is a two-way relation here: not only does situation influence the choice of language, but choice of language influences situation – or, more precisely, the nature of the situation as perceived by the speaker and hearer. Thus, someone answering the phone with the <very formal> question To whom am I speaking? would, by that very utterance, establish a more formal relationship with the other speaker than if the question had been Who am I speaking to?

Formality of vocabulary and grammar

49 In English there are many differences of vocabulary between formal and informal language. Much of the vocabulary of formal English is of French, Latin, or Greek origin. In contrast, informal language is characterized by vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon origin. Compare:

<formal>	<less formal>
aid	help
commence	begin
conceal	hide
continue	keep on
conclude	end

Many phrasal and prepositional verbs (see 630–4) belong to informal English. Compare:

<formal>	<informal>
delete	cross off
encounter	come across
enter	go in(to)
investigate	look into
surrender	give in
renovate	do up

These differences show how formal and informal English provide the speaker with substantially different resources for communication, and again illustrate the difficulty of translating a sentence in one variety into an equivalent sentence in the other. The choice of appropriate grammar is intimately connected to the choice of vocabulary.

Impersonal style <impersonal>

50 Formal written language often goes with an impersonal style, i.e. one in which the speaker avoids personal references to speaker and/or hearer, such as I, you, and we. Some of the common features of impersonal language are passives (see 613–18), sentences beginning with introductory it (see 542–6), and abstract nouns (see 67–9). All these features are illustrated in:

Announcement from the librarian

It has been noted with concern that the stock of books in the library has been declining alarmingly. Students are asked to remind themselves of the rules for borrowing and return of books, and to bear in mind the needs of other users. Penalties for overdue books will in the future be strictly enforced.

The author of the above could have written a more informal and less impersonal message as follows:

Bring those books back!
Books in the library have been disappearing. Please make sure you know the rules for borrowing, and don't forget that the library is for everyone's convenience. From now on, we're going to enforce the rules strictly. You have been warned!

Polite and familiar language <polite>, <familiar>

51 Our language tends to be more <polite> when we are talking to a person we do not know well, or to a person more senior in age or social position. Context also plays a role: for example, if we are asking a big favour, such as the loan of a large sum of money, this will induce greater politeness than if we were asking a small favour, such as the loan of a pen.

English has no special familiar pronouns or polite pronouns, like some languages (e.g. French *tu/vous*, German *du/Sie* corresponding to English *you*). But familiarity can be shown in other ways. Thus, when we know someone well or intimately, we tend to drop polite forms of language. Instead of using a polite vocative such as *Mrs*, *Mr*, or *Ms* we tend to use first name (*Peter*) or a short name (*Pete*) or even a nickname or pet name (*Misty*, *Lilo*, *Boo-boo*, etc.). Interestingly, present-day English makes little use of the surname alone, except in third person reference (e.g. *Shakespeare*, *Bach*, *Bush*) to someone one does not know personally, but by repute, such as a famous author, composer or politician.

52 Polite language behaviour is most observable in such speech acts as requesting, advising, and offering (*see* 333–5, 347). Compare, for example, these requests:

Shut the door, will you? <familiar>

Would you please shut the door? <rather polite>
I wonder if you would mind shutting the door. <more polite>

The word *please* has the sole function of indicating politeness when one is making a request. But it has little effect in itself: to give a really polite impression, *please* usually has to be combined with devices of indirectness such as using a question, the hypothetical *could* or *would*, etc. (*see* 248, 333–4).

At the other end of the scale, slang is language which is very familiar in style, and is usually restricted to members of a particular social group, for example 'teenage slang', 'army slang', 'theatre slang'. Slang is not easy to understand unless you are a member of a particular group or class of people. Because of its restricted use, and its short life, we will not be concerned with slang in this book.

Tactful and tentative language <tactful>, <tentative>

53 Politeness and indirectness are linked with tact. To be **tactful** is to avoid causing offence or distress to another person. Sometimes tact means disguising or covering up the truth. A request, suggestion or piece of advice can be made more tactful by making it more **tentative**. Compare:

You'd better put off the meeting until tomorrow. <informal, familiar>

Look – why don't you postpone the meeting until tomorrow? <informal>

May I suggest you postpone the meeting until tomorrow? <tactful, tentative>

Don't you think it might be a good idea to postpone the meeting until tomorrow? <more tactful, more tentative>

In other cases tentativeness is simply an indication of speakers' reluctance to commit themselves on given questions. For example, *might just* is a more tentative way of expressing possibility than *may*:

Someone *may* have made a mistake.
Someone *might just* have made a mistake. <more tentative>

Literary, elevated or rhetorical language <literary>, <elevated>, <rhetorical>

54 Some features of English of limited use have a 'literary' or 'elevated' tone: they belong mainly to the literary or religious language of the past, but can still be used today by someone who wants to move or impress us. An example of elevated language comes from a speech by President George W. Bush:

Our nation – this generation – will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. [1]

We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail echoes the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln [1] and Winston Churchill [2]:

But in a large sense we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow this ground. [1]

We shall not flag or fail... We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, ... we shall never surrender. [2]

In addition to the variety labels <literary> and <elevated>, we occasionally use the similar label <rhetorical>. This signifies a stylized use of language, consciously chosen for an emphatic or emotive effect. A good example of this is the so-called 'rhetorical question' (*see* 305), which is meant to be interpreted as an emphatic statement:

Is it any wonder that politicians are mistrusted? (= 'It is no wonder...')

Although we meet them in the literature of earlier periods, literary, elevated and rhetorical forms of language tend to be unusual in the English of today (and noticeable for that very reason). We will refer to them only very occasionally in this book.

Levels of usage: a map of variety labels

55 Apart from the national varieties <AmE> and <BrE>, the different types of English we have discussed are related to one another, and might go under the general title of **levels of usage**. We might attempt to place them on a scale running from 'elevated' English at one extreme to 'slang' at the other extreme. But it is probably better to think in terms of three pairs of contrasting values, as shown:
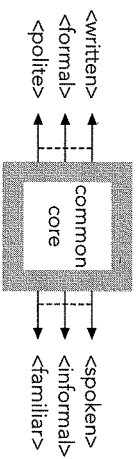
This diagram represents only the most important levels of usage, ignoring the more restricted variety labels, such as <impersonal> and <elevated>. The features on the left tend to go together – likewise the features on the right – and this is conveyed by the vertical broken lines. But the lines are broken because the connection does not always hold: for example, it is possible to express oneself politely in spoken English, and it is possible to express oneself informally in written English.

The horizontal arrows represent scales of contrast. The common core of 'unmarked' usage occupies a middle area between the extremes of each of the three scales.

56 In Parts Two and Three we make free use of the labels for varieties of English, because we feel it is important to give as full guidance as possible on the 'appropriate use' of English grammatical forms and structures. Some speakers of English may disagree with some of our judgements on the uses of these labels. This is because our knowledge of 'levels of usage' still remains, today, very much a subjective matter, depending on the perceptions of people who use the language. For example, an older English speaker might regard as <familiar> a form of language which might not seem so to a younger speaker. There are also differences of perception in different English-speaking countries. Thus, without considering these labels as descriptive of general standards of appropriateness, we would like you to use them for guidance in your own use of the language.

Grammar in use