

WHAT IS STANDARD ENGLISH



Since the 1980s, the notion of 'standard' has come to the fore in public debate about the English language. At national level, in several countries (but especially in the UK), the concern has focused on the devising of an acceptable national curriculum for English in primary and secondary education.

At international level, the focus has been on the question of which national standards to use in teaching English as a foreign language. In both contexts, however, there is a need for clear understanding about what Standard English (SE) actually is. Disentangling the issues is best done first at national level, where the issues have been around a long time, and are reasonably well understood. From the dozens of definitions available in the literature on English, we may extract five essential characteristics.

Defining Standard English

- ◆ SE is a variety of English - a distinctive combination of linguistic features with a particular role to play. Some people call it a 'dialect' of English - and so it is, but of a rather special kind, for it has no local base. There is nothing in the grammar and vocabulary of a piece of SE to tell us which part of a country it comes from.
- ◆ The linguistic features of SE are chiefly matters of grammar, vocabulary and orthography (spelling and punctuation). It is important to note that SE is not a matter of pronunciation: SE is spoken in a wide variety of accents (including, of course, any prestige accent a country may have, such as British Received Pronunciation).
- ◆ SE is the variety of English which carries most prestige within a country. 'Prestige' is a social concept, whereby some people have high standing in the eyes of others, whether this derives from social class, material success, political strength, popular acclaim, or educational background. The English that these people choose to use will, by this very fact, become the standard within their

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English?
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investigates.*

community. In the words of one US linguist, SE is 'the English used by the powerful' (James Sledd).

- ◆ The prestige attached to SE is recognised by adult members of the community, and this motivates them to recommend SE as a desirable educational target. It is the variety which is used as the norm of communication by the community's leading institutions, such as its government, law courts, and media. It is therefore the variety which is likely to be the most widely disseminated among the public. It will, accordingly, be widely understood - though not by everyone, and with varying comprehension of some of its features (thus motivating the demands of the 'plain English' campaigns). It may or may not be liked.
- ◆ Although SE is widely understood, it is not widely produced. Only a minority of people within a country (e.g. radio newscasters) actually use it when they talk. Most people speak a variety of regional English, or an admixture of standard and regional Englishes, and reserve such labels as 'BBC English' or 'the Queen's English' for what they perceive to be a

'pure' SE. Similarly, when they write - itself a minority activity - the consistent use of SE is required only in certain tasks (such as a letter to a newspaper, but not necessarily to a close friend). More than anywhere else, SE is to be found in print.

On this basis, we may define the Standard English of an English-speaking country as a minority variety (identified chiefly by its vocabulary, grammar, and orthography) which carries most prestige and is most widely understood.

World Standard English?

If we read the newspapers or listen to the newscasters around the English-speaking world, we will quickly develop the impression that there is a World Standard English (WSE), acting as a strongly unifying force among the vast range of variation which exists. However, a totally uniform, regionally neutral, and unarguably prestigious variety does not exist worldwide.

- ◆ Each country where English is a first language is aware of its linguistic identity, and is anxious to preserve it from the influence of others. New Zealanders do not want to be Australians; Canadians do not want to be 'Americans', and *Americanism* is perceived as a danger signal by usage guardians everywhere (except in the USA).
- ◆ All other countries can be grouped into those which follow American English, those which follow British English, and those (such as Canada) where there is a mixture of influences. One of the most noticeable features of this divided usage is spelling. In certain domains, such as computing and medicine, US spellings are becoming increasingly widespread (*program, disk, pediatrics*), but we are a long way from uniformity.
- ◆ A great deal of lexical distinctiveness can be observed in the specialised terms of local politics, business, culture and natural history, and in the 'domestic' columns of national newspapers (such as Want Ads). There is also a certain amount of grammatical distinctiveness, especially between US and UK English.
- ◆ The notion of a 'standard pronunciation' is useful in the international setting of English as a second or foreign language, but here too there is more than one teaching model - chiefly, British Received Pronunciation and US General American.

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- ◆ The question of prestige is not easy to determine, at an international level, because of the different national histories which coexist. Would it be more prestigious for a report from an international body to appear in British or American spelling? Should it refer to *cars* or *automobiles*? What image do its authors wish to convey? Decisions about such matters are made in innumerable contexts every day. It will take time before the world sees a consensus, and only time will tell whether this consensus will display the domination of a present-day variety of English (such as American English), develop a new, composite variety (as in the kind of English commonly heard in the corridors of power of the European Community, and sometimes called 'Euro-English'), or create an entirely fresh variety, based on a set of assumptions about those aspects of English which are most useful for international purposes (as in the proposal in the early 1980s to develop a 'nuclear' kind of English which would include only the most communicative features of grammar and vocabulary).

It is, accordingly, difficult to know what to expect, when a language develops a worldwide presence to the extent that English has. There are no precedents for such a geographical spread or for so many speakers. Moreover, the speed at which it has all happened is unprecedented: although the history of world English can be traced back 400 years, the current growth spurt in the language has a history of less than 40 years. There has never been such an increase in independent states (UN membership has more than doubled since 1960) nor such a growth in world population (from 2.5 thousand million in 1950 to 5.6 thousand million in 1994). How will English fare (how would any language fare?), faced with such responsibilities and having to respond to such pressures?

The Conflict between Internationalism and Identity

The examples above suggest that there are two chief issues - of internationalism and of identity. The problem is that these conflict. In the former case, a nation looks out from itself at the world as a whole, and tries to define its needs in relation to that world. In the latter case, a nation looks within itself at the structure of its society and the psychology of its people, and tries to define its needs in relation to its sense of national identity. Corresponding linguistic issues automatically arise.

- ◆ Internationalism implies intelligibility. If the reason for any nation wishing to promote English is to give it access to what the broader English-speaking world has to offer, then it is crucial for its people to be able to understand the English of that world, and to be understood in their turn. In short, internationalism demands an agreed standard - in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and conventions of use - and promotes the notion of a World Standard English.
- ◆ Identity implies individuality. If a nation wishes to preserve its uniqueness or to establish its presence, and to avoid being an anonymous ingredient in a cultural melting-pot, then it must search for ways of expressing its difference from the rest of the world. Flags, uniforms, and other such symbols will have their place, but nothing will be so naturally and universally present as a national language - or, if there is none, a national variety of an international language. In short, in the context of English, identity demands linguistic distinctiveness - in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, or conventions of language use - and promotes the notion of a diverse set of Regional Standard Englishes.

The Drive for Intelligibility

The pressure for international intelligibility is very strong, and may by now be unstoppable. International travel, satellite broadcasting, world press and television, world stock markets, multinational corporations, intergovernmental agencies, and many other institutions have guaranteed a situation of daily contact for hundreds of millions of English speakers who together represent every major variety. Historical loyalties (e.g. to Britain) have been largely replaced by pragmatic, utilitarian reasoning. If using British English can sell goods and services, then let British English be used. If it needs American English, then so be it. And let either or others be employed as occasion demands.

It is not surprising, in such a climate, to find a core of English grammar, vocabulary and orthography already in widespread use, at least in print. There is, however, still some way to go before the world arrives at a level of uniform usage which will guarantee international intelligibility at levels comparable to those found intranationally. Breakdowns in communication due to differences in idiom, vocabulary, or grammar are common enough, even between British and American English, and differences in regional accent can be devastating.

The Drive for Identity

The pressure to foster national identity is also very strong, and the signs are that divergence is increasing. The 1990s has seen no reduction in the number of conflicts which involve regions trying to establish their independence, and one consequence of successful nationalism is the early adoption of speech forms marking a linguistic distance between the new nation and its colonial antecedents. Two local factors readily foster this distancing:

- ◆ It is inevitable, first of all, that when English is in close contact with other languages, it will adopt some of the characteristics of those languages, especially their vocabulary and prosody. The latter, in particular, can be a major source of local variety identity, as is heard in the distinctive stress-time rhythm of Indian or Caribbean English, or the rising intonations of Australian and New Zealand English.
- ◆ Secondly, the fact that English is found all over the world means that it will be used to express an unparalleled range of fauna, flora, and cultural features. Each English-speaking country will accordingly find itself with thousands of words to express its local character. Whether we view these words as part of a world standard or a regional standard will depend chiefly on the extent to which the world at large is interested in the notions they express. Thus, in South African English *apartheid* and *impala* have become part of the general English vocabulary, whereas *dorp* ('small town or village') and *bredie* ('type of stew') have not. The words most resistant to world standardisation will be those which already have equivalents in Standard British or American English, such as *outwith* (Scots, 'outside') or *godown* (Indian, 'warehouse').

There may be a natural balance which the language will eventually achieve. A nationalistic climate may cause a variety to move in a particular direction away from its source standard, but may then be pulled back when moderates within the community find it increasingly difficult to understand what is being said. An example of this actually happening was reported in 1985 by Alan Maley, at the time the British Council Representative in South India:

Mrs Indira Gandhi was prompted to write to her Ministry of Education not so long ago to complain of falling standards of English in India, reportedly after attending an international meeting at

which she had been unable to understand the contribution of the Indian delegate (speaking in English).

The features of Indian English which gave Mrs Gandhi a problem are well-recognised. Whether her reaction was representative and influential remains to be seen.

The future of English

There is no linguistic subject more prone to emotional rhetoric or wild exaggeration than the future of the English language. Heights of optimism complete with depths of pessimism. Among the optimists we may cite the German philologist Jakob Grimm, who addressed the point in a lecture published in 1852:

“Of all modern languages, not one has acquired such great strengths and vigour as the English... (it) may be called justly a LANGUAGE OF THE WORLD and seems, like the English nation, to be destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe.”

In the late Victorian period, estimates of the numbers of mother-tongue English speakers living a century thereafter (i.e. today) often reached astronomical heights. One writer, in an issue of *The Phonetic Journal* (13 September 1873) calculated (with hopeful precision) that by the year 2000 this total would be 1,837,286,153 - an estimate which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be seen to be in error by a factor of six. Such totals were commonplace in the heady atmosphere which accompanied the climax of British and American colonial expansion.

By contrast, there were the pessimists, predicting that within a century the English language would be in fragments. Here we may cite the British philologist Henry Sweet, who wrote in 1877:

“...by that time (a century hence) England, America, and Australia will be speaking mutually unintelligible languages, owing to their independent changes of pronunciation.”

The same point had been made nearly a century before by Noah Webster, in his *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789). Webster thought that such a development would be ‘necessary and unavoidable’, and would result in ‘a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another’. From Webster’s pro-American point of view, of course, this would not have been such a bad thing.

Neither Grimm nor Sweet proved to be accurate prophets. English has indeed become a world language, but it is by no means everywhere and it is by no means always welcome. And English has indeed developed many spoken varieties, but these are by no means mutually unintelligible. Perhaps the only safe generalisation to be made is that predictions about the future of English have a habit of being wrong.

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