

# Little need to worry

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*The consulting editor of English Today adds:*



There's a curious mixture of truth and perversity in Tony Fairman's article. It puzzled me greatly. He's absolutely right to say that we have massive gaps in our knowledge of English grammar – of all varieties. He's also right to say that the variety generally called 'standard English' has been better served than any other. But this is only a tiny part of the story.

First of all, it's important not to overstate the case. The differences between standard and non-standard English grammar are not as great as all that. I've never counted just how many non-standard constructions there are of the type illustrated by 'we was' and 'ain't', but I should be surprised if the total were more than 100. The vast majority of the 'rules' in a grammar such as the Quirk *Comprehensive* are the same for all varieties of English. The 'common core' that this grammar identifies (see its section 1.19) is defined with reference to *all* varieties of English, not just the standard.

Of course the features that make Scouse and all the other varieties distinctive should be described in such grammar books, alongside the features that make standard English distinctive. But let's be fair. It's only in recent years that grammarians have been able to break out of the 200-year mould which insisted that only formal written English should be so described. Bringing in spoken English at all was a major breakthrough. Bringing in informal speech was another. It has taken a lot of people a lot of time getting those areas properly investigated – and the job is by no means complete. There's a great deal of standard English grammar that is still only partly understood, as any PhD student in English linguistics will tell you.

And the non-standard varieties? Tony Fairman seems to be unaware that many linguists are these days taking non-standard varieties of English very seriously indeed. The point is clear from the pages of 'Language in Society', 'World Englishes', and

several other sociolinguistic periodicals and texts. I glance at my shelves, and two recent books catch my eye: Cheshire's *Variation in an English dialect* (based on the speech of Reading, Berkshire) and Horvath's *Variation in Australian English* (based on the speech of Sydney, Australia), both in the CUP series, Studies in Linguistics. The books are dated 1982 and 1985, and they are full of descriptive detail. As grammars develop, I have no doubt that the kind of information these books contain will gradually be incorporated. But as the relevant research has only recently been carried out, and as many cities and regions are still virgin territory, from a grammatical point of view, it's not too surprising that 'current grammar books don't, in fact, provide such knowledge'. Nor would there be anything to be gained by putting in a pile of information about Reading English, say, and a few other places where some research has been done, when so much else would be missing. An unsystematic description of this kind would be positively misleading. (That's the reason, incidentally, why the Quirk team dealt so sporadically with regional, class, occupational, and other data on varieties, and handled such points largely in the notes. We do not yet have sufficient raw data on which a representative and systematic 'variety grammar' could be based.)

I can't see the point in ceasing to use the word 'standard', as Tony Fairman recommends. That would be to ignore a social, cultural, and educational reality that linguists reflect and do not control. Nor can I grasp what he is getting at in his final paragraph, where he asks us to 'consider how far children's potential for becoming fully literate is handicapped by them having to learn to read and write "standard" English . . .'. The value of a standard is precisely that it is a standard, whose function is to enable intelligible inter-group communication to take place. That is why people learn it. His point about children being potentially handicapped

by it I find obscure, in the absence of any suggestions as to what a less-handicapping alternative might be.

In looking back over the article, I have the impression that he is not doing justice to certain important distinctions. Take the difference between 'non-standard' and 'sub-standard'. I would never use the latter term to describe varieties of English; for me, it is indeed pejorative, in the way he suggests. But I have never had such problems with 'non-standard', which to me is as neutral and descriptive a term as 'non-random', 'non-voter', and hundreds more. It may be that there is some language change going on here, so that 'non-standard' is gradually becoming pejorative, and perhaps one day we shall have to drop it, as we search for a neutral metalanguage. But that hasn't been the sense involved in linguists' usage so far, and it's wrong to read it in.

Similarly, in his discussion of prescriptivism, he seems to have blurred the difference between descriptive and applied approaches. If I am analysing the speech patterns of a language-handicapped child, I am being a descriptive linguist. If I then make recommendations about the type of structures to be taught (whether standard, non-standard, or both), and the sequence in which they should be taught, I am being an applied linguist, and am necessarily being prescriptive. The same point applies in foreign language teaching, and also the world over in the domain known as *language planning*. Here, an attempt is made to make a principled decision as to which kind of language (local, foreign, British English, US English, French, creole *lingua franca* . . .) will best suit the needs of a community and best reconcile competing interests. The applied linguist's task becomes more difficult, the larger the problem, and the more people (and thus varieties and languages) involved, but the principle is the same. Nothing is to be gained by mixing up the descriptive stage of the enquiry, where prescriptivism is out of place, and the inter-

vention or planning stage, where it is essential. What was wrong with traditional pedagogical prescriptivism was that the prescriptions bore little relation to the facts of usage, and seemed to fly in the face of those facts. That was why the word gained its pejorative overtones. We have, I hope, learned from that period in linguistic history, and should now distinguish clearly between 'old' (P1) and 'new' (P2) prescriptivisms. In the applied field, a descriptively based policy of intervention to help solve language problems is eminently desirable, especially in parts of the world which (unlike Britain) have not had the benefit of several hundred years of experience of gradual standardization, yet which are under extreme political and economic pressure to 'make up their minds'. Such policies aim to be prescriptive (P2), without being prescriptive (P1). This is the kind of issue raised by Sidney Greenbaum's observation, which Tony Fairman's article glosses over.

Issues of language planning need to be taken very seriously, because they are going to loom increasingly large, with reference to English. Whatever the problems in the use of the term 'standard' to date, in the context of British English, these pale alongside the problems which are now emerging in the world context, where competing standards have arisen between different countries. Here too a great deal of descriptive work remains to be done, before findings can be neatly summarised in grammars. It doesn't help to oversimplify, though. I don't think there are many who would 'prescribe one "model" of English for all contexts the world over'. The current trend is very much in the reverse direction. A pervasive theme of present-day conferences on English, and associated monographs and journals, is to take the diversity of the Englishes of the world very seriously indeed, and to describe what is going on as closely as possible. I reckon Tony Fairman doesn't need to be so worried.

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