

# 13 Which English – or English *Which?*

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'Choice' is one of the buzz-words of the 1990s. We find it frequently mentioned in the publicity statements and charters whereby institutions define their policies to the public. In 1993, for example, the BBC issued a document entitled 'Extending Choice', and introduced a policy of 'Producer Choice'. Shops continue to proclaim the benefits of 'customer choice', and consumer organizations examine the realities beneath these claims. In educational contexts, the notion appears as part of the discussion of curriculum options and in the selection of literary texts.

Choice is also a familiar notion in linguistics, long being part of the analysis of the contrasts presented by a language – for example, the 'choice' between singular and plural, voiced and voiceless, synchronic and diachronic, or syntagmatic and paradigmatic. It is inherent in stylistics, where the language is seen as making available to authors a range of 'choices' (in vocabulary, word order, rhyme, etc.) and it is therefore not surprising to find it looming large in the context of the language curriculum, where there has been a great deal of discussion of the kind of varieties that children should be expected to deal with, and of the range of linguistic features which should be prescribed or proscribed. Indeed, the whole prescriptive/descriptive debate in language teaching could be reformulated as a question of choice: Who decides what language we shall speak or write in our society?

What role should the linguist play, in the educational debate? Responsible choice presupposes an informed awareness of the range from which to choose. The consumer magazine *Which?* describes itself as 'the most comprehensive source of independent, unbiased information about goods and services on offer to consumers in the UK'. This is a satisfactory perspective for linguists also. Which linguistic goods and services are on offer to the English-using child? Linguists can provide both synchronic and diachronic answers to this question. The synchronic issue is one of selection: which varieties and features shall we introduce? The diachronic issue is one of sequence: in which chronological order shall we present these matters to children? This chapter looks only at the

synchronic issue, and in particular at the question of Standard English – which, if anything, is what most people want children ultimately to be able to 'own'.

The discussion of the notion of 'standard' varies, depending on whether we are dealing with it at a national or international level. At a national level, in several countries (but especially in the United Kingdom), the concern has focused on its place as part 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 should be used in teaching English as a foreign language. In both contexts, however, before sensible decisions can be made about how to introduce standard English or teach it, there is a need for clear understanding about what it actually is. The cautious opening of the entry on Standard English (SE) in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992), written by the editor, Tom McArthur, suggests that we may be entering a minefield: 'a widely used term that resists easy definition but is used as if most educated people nonetheless know precisely what it refers to . . .' Disentangling the issues is best done first at national level, where the issues have been around a long time, and are reasonably well understood.

## What is Standard English?

From the dozens of definitions available in the literature on English, we may extract five essential characteristics:

- 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 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 community. In the words of one US linguist, James Sledd, SE is 'the English used by the powerful'.
- The prestige attached to SE is recognized 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 an old 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.

### The origins of Standard English

This variety is the result of a combination of influences, the most important of which do not emerge until the Middle English period. There is no direct connection between West Saxon, the prestige dialect of Old English and the modern standard. The political heart of the country moved from Winchester to London after the Conquest, and the major linguistic trends during Middle English increasingly relate to the development of the capital as a social, political, and commercial centre. A written Standard English began to emerge during the fifteenth century and, following the detailed study of the dialect characteristics of the period, it is now possible to isolate key factors which contributed to its identity:

- A regionally standardized literary language appeared in the last part of the fourteenth century, based on the dialects of the Central Midland counties, especially Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire. This is chiefly found in the large number of Wycliffite manuscripts which have survived, including sermons, tracts, prayers, poems, and the different versions of the Wycliffe Bible, as well as several secular works. The Lollards spread this variety widely, even into south-west England, thus increasing its status as a standard. In the long term, it was unable to compete with the quantity of material emanating from the capital, but its Central Midland origins are nevertheless noteworthy.
- The growth of a standard from the London area can be seen by the mid-fourteenth century. Although London was very much a dialectal hybrid

(with the City influenced by the Essex dialect, and Westminster, some distance further west, showing the influence of Middlesex), patterns of standardization gradually appear. There is a small group of manuscripts, written prior to 1370, which are noted for their uniformity of spelling. A later and much larger group of diverse manuscripts includes the work of Chaucer and Gower. These texts in their different ways represent London English of around 1400, but the amount of variation they display suggests that they cannot be called a standard, in any strict sense. Not even Chaucer's writing, traditionally thought to be a precursor of modern Standard English, exercised a specific influence on the form this standard took – nor is it likely that poetic usage would ever influence general usage in any real way. It can hardly be doubted, though, that Chaucer's literary standing would have greatly added to the prestige associated with written language in the London dialect.

- The most significant factor must have been the emergence of London as the political and commercial centre of the country. In particular the influence of the administrative offices of the London Chancery is now thought to have been critical, especially after c.1430. Vast amounts of manuscript copying took place within the Westminster area, and standards of practice emerged among the Chancery scribes. These practices then influenced the many individual scribes who worked privately, and eventually all kinds of material, including literary texts, were affected. It would not have taken long for a widespread standardization to be current. When Caxton set up his press, also in Westminster, and chose local London speech as his norm, the lasting influence of his Chancery neighbours was assured.

These observations add up to the claim that the main influence on the standard language was the Central Midlands area, several of whose linguistic features eventually influenced the shape of Chancery Standard. That the central area could exercise such influence is suggested by a number of contemporary comments, as well as by deductions based on social history. John of Trevisa, translating Higden's *Polychronicon* in c.1387, identifies its function as a communication 'bridge' between north and south (*th* here replaces his use of the Old English letter 'thorn'):

for men of the est with men of the west, as it were vndir the same partie of heuene, acordeth more in sownynge of speche [pronunciation] than men of the north with men of the south; therefore it is that Mercii [Mercians], that beeth men of myddel Engeland, as it were parteners of the endes, vnderstondeth bettre the side langages, northerne and southerne, than northerne and southerne vnderstondeth either other.

By way of social considerations, we have evidence of a marked population shift in the fourteenth century. In the earlier part of that century, immigration to the London area was highest from the East Midlands counties of Norfolk, Essex and Hertfordshire, but it later increased dramatically from such Central

Midlands counties as Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire. As a result, the London dialect came to display many of the linguistic features of Midland writing.

These observations bring a fresh perspective to the traditional map of Middle English dialects, where no recognition is given to a Central Midlands area, and where special attention is paid to an East Midlands 'triangle' bounded by London, Cambridge, and (on the borders with Southern) Oxford – an area of high population, containing the main social and political centre, and the main seats of learning. This was a wealthy agricultural region, and the centre of the growing wool trade. Its role in promoting the importance of the south-east in the Middle Ages is clear. However, the findings of present-day historical dialectology suggest that its linguistic influence was far less important than that of the area further west.

The final factor in the development of a southern literary standard was the development of printing. This resulted in the spread of a single norm over most of the country, so much so that during the fifteenth century it becomes increasingly difficult to determine on internal linguistic grounds the dialect in which a literary work is written – apart from the northern dialects, such as Scots, which retained their written identity longer. People now begin to make value judgements about other dialects. In the Towneley Plays, Mak the sheep-stealer masquerades as a person of importance, and adopts a southern accent. John of Trevisa comments that northern speech is 'scharp, slitting, and frotynge and vnschape' ('shrill, cutting, and grating and ill-formed'), giving as one of the reasons that northerners live far away from the court. And in *The Arte of English Poesie*, attributed to George Puttenham (c.1520–90), the aspiring poet is advised to use 'the usuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles, and not much above'. There was never to be total uniformity, but the forerunner of Standard English undoubtedly existed by the end of the fifteenth century.

### World Standard English?

The history of Standard English in Britain is now fairly well understood. What is difficult is 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 (United Nations membership has more than doubled since 1960) nor such a growth in world population (from 2.5 thousand million in 1950 to 5.4 thousand million in 1992). How will English fare (how would *any* language fare?), faced with such responsibilities and having to respond to such pressures?

The two chief issues – internationalism and identity – raise an immediate problem, because they 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.
- *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.

How the English language will develop depends on how the tension between these two principles will be resolved. Currently, the notion of 'standard' cannot be generalized to a world context in a straightforward way. 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 yet 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 America).
- All other countries can be grouped into those which follow American English, those which follow British English, and those (e.g. 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 specialized

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.
- The question of prestige is not easy to determine, at an international level, because of the different national histories which co-exist. 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 or the development of a new, composite variety.

### Messages for the consumer

Although most of the recent educational debate has inevitably focused upon the role of SE in the United Kingdom, the future power and value of the concept will derive from its role in the international situation. It is therefore important for any course dealing with SE to inculcate awareness of what is happening to the language worldwide. Here, three points are paramount:

1. There is no longer a single kind of SE, but several, linked to the identities of the major English-speaking nations. The concept of 'regional standards' now holds centre stage.
2. In this setting, the prestige of British SE can no longer be assumed. Indeed, in several parts of the world, it has lost prestige and is an unacceptable model. This presents the British with an uncomfortable contrast to its prestige-laden role within the UK.
3. A World SE exists, but is still at a fairly primitive stage of development – in a similar position to that of British SE at the beginning of the fifteenth century (and actually with a less predictable future, for there are now several centres of gravity pulling the language in different directions.)

Children and curriculum designers need to be preparing now for the questions of consumer choice which will be presented by this multi-standard world. Indeed, it may be no more than a few decades before we find the evolution of a fresh controversy in the UK: 'Should World Standard English be taught at Key Stage 1?'

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