

# The standardiz/sation of English

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Let me start you off with a quiz. I shall expect answers at the end. Which one of the following is not Standard English:

She stepped onto the sidewalk

He drove through a robot on the way to work

He's a swinging voter

I never went there

If you require assistance outwith normal hours ...

You, perhaps, were expecting answers, not questions, so let me move on.

Before the fifteenth century there was no standard. After the Norman Conquest the formal standard language was usually Latin, less often French. Of course, English had not disappeared, and in the fourteenth century there was a flowering of literature, Chaucer being only the most obvious example. Another useful example to consider is the author of *Gawaine and the Grene Knight*. That author is particularly useful, because he was undoubtedly writing in a local dialect form most probably the very north of Staffordshire. This demonstrates both that a language can survive without a standard form and that literate and sophisticated material can be written in dialect. This opens up another interesting question for you. *Is there any necessary correlation between literary merit and the existence of a standard?*

And another question too: *Does the use of non-standard forms create serious problems of clarity?*

I have said that there was no standard until about the mid-fifteenth century. Why a standard should have arisen then. And how and where? The fundamental work on these questions was done by Michael Samuels 1960s. Samuels identified four types of incipient standard. Type I is associated particularly with the Wycliffite texts of the mid to late 14th century. Type I texts come mostly from the Central Midlands, i.e., Northamptonshire, Huntingdon and Bedfordshire. Type II is represented by a group of mid 14th century texts which show the features we would expect from texts from London or Essex. The central texts of Type III are the best manuscripts of Chaucer which show London English, at least at the Court, of around 1400. Samuels calls Type IV "Chancery Standard", and it is best evidenced by the mass of government material which first begins to appear roundabout 1430.

Here are some examples of the usage in these 4 types:

Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
<i>sych</i> such	<i>suche</i>	<i>swich</i>	<i>suche</i>
<i>þey</i> they	<i>hij</i>	<i>they</i>	<i>they</i>
<i>Zouun</i> gave	<i>yafe</i>	<i>yaf</i>	<i>gaf</i>
<i>her</i> their	<i>hire</i>	<i>hire</i>	<i>theyre</i>

There are, obviously, substantial differences between each type. Some modern type forms can be seen already in Type I, e.g. *þey* (= *they*), whilst others only appear in Type IV. Furthermore, only Type IV is immediately recognisable as an antecedent of the present-day language.

Now this situation is rather curious. Consider in particular the differences between Types II and IV. It would appear that they both represent forms of London English separated merely by a period of less than a century. But the differences are so large that chronology scarcely seems a sufficient explanation. The answer to this puzzle is manifold. A key element was certainly patterns of immigration in London. In the early 14th century immigration into London was primarily from the Home Counties and East Anglia. But during the century the immigration patterns changes, with the principal sources being the East Central Midlands, although immigration continued from Norfolk at a steady rate. As such immigrants moved to London, they would, of course, bring their dialect with them, including such non-London forms as *they* and *theyre*. Very roughly speaking, what we are presented with is an amalgam where potent elements are older London English alongside newer forms from the Central Midlands and East Anglia. The standard language which emerges is not properly London English at all ~ London English carries on and is still today easily distinguished from Standard English. But there is more to the development than that.

Einar Haugen suggested that standardisation must meet four criteria: selection, codification, elaboration and acceptance. Standard English was selected because the seat of government was in London, it was codified partly through printing, for printers required settled forms, and partly through education, as the new middle classes demanded an education in English, rather than French or Latin. Its elaboration was a result of its quick spread through all written discourse, and not merely the language of government. These three effects then led to its acceptance as the usage of educated people, at least in formal situations.

By the end of the 16th century, George Puttenham was able to advise:

ye shall therefore take the vsuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles, and not much above. I say not this but that in euery shyre of England there be gentlemen and others that speake but especially write as good Southerne as we of Middlesex or Surrey do, but not the common people of euery shire ...

You should note here that there is a geographical limitation set upon the "vsuall speach". Also, there is a distinction made between writing and speaking. And last of all, such language is not to be used by the common people of "euery shire". Thus Puttenham's prescription suggests that the standard language has three properties:

- 1 It is geographically restricted
- 2 It is written rather than spoken
- 3 It is class-based

Despite Puttenham, the evolution of Standard English is not as straightforward as this. The most important of these difficulties involved the fact that around the time he was writing English was undergoing a major reorganisation of its vowel system. Not only that, but new vowel systems were being evolved in different parts of the country.

To cut a complicated story short, there appears to have been two systems at work in London at the time. The first, which I'll call System 1, was the system derived from Chancery Standard. The second, System 2, was been used by middle class speakers including immigrant speakers from East and Central Midlands. From our point of view today, the interesting aspect of this dual

system is that during the 17th century System 2 gradually ousted the more conservative Chancery Standard of System 1.

This could only have occurred as the result of dialect contact. But more than that, there must have been a sociological context beyond the mere linguistic. The explanation which seems most plausible is that aspiring middle class speakers from the Midlands, as they arrived in London, found themselves, as they strove to improve their position, attempted without success to assimilate their speech to the aristocratic manners of the Court. If we try to replicate the resolution of this dialect conflict with the linguistic situation at the beginning of the 21st century, there happens to be a remarkable parallel. For, just as in the 17th century, today we find another group of social climbers whose dialect norms are invading the standard language. That, of course is the contemporary phenomenon known as Estuary English. I shall return to the question of Estuary English later, because it poses interesting questions.

But the first point is that standard English is not constant. Change occurs. Furthermore that change is not purely linguistic. That is to say, although change can occur as the result of internal linguistic change, for example the rise of the auxiliary verb *do*, absent from the language until about the fifteenth century. It also occurs as the result of social factors. The rise of System 2 is clear evidence of that. Indeed, some contemporary writers deplored the change. Alexander Gil, who taught, amongst others, John Milton, talks about "the affectations of the Mopsies", most probably the 17th century equivalent of Estuary English speakers. Thus social prejudices affecting the language even then. Gil was complaining about men such as John Hart, one of the other great spelling reformers of the time. It would appear that whereas Gil used System 1, the old aristocratic system, Hart was a middle class System 2 speaker.

Be that as it may, even System 2 was not designed to last. That system had some features which are today archaic, not current in Standard English since the 18th century. The most obvious of these is seen in writers such as Pope, who rhymes *speak* and *take*. The loss of such rhymes was again the result of dialect mixture, and it seems probably the result of influence from East Anglian dialects. The vowel system there was quite distinct from either of the other two systems we have looked at, and had been so since Anglo-Saxon times. But the links between there and London had always remained strong, and it would appear that the mix of rural and urban was the force which allowed the development of a new System, System 3 in our terms to emerge.

It is tempting to assume that, once System 3 had taken over, the Standard language settled down. Yet there are continuing changes, not merely in the vowel system. Changes affecting every area of the language. To stick with the sound system for one more moment, the fact that my speech is peppered with glottal stops, a feature which astonishes my Californian colleagues and which some of you may regard as uncouth, has to be set against the claim which I would make that I speak Standard English. Time for another question: *How can that be true?*

The apparent strangeness of my claim leads us away from sound systems. For the issue which becomes more and more important in the 18th century is *codification*. No doubt most of you will know of Jonathan Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*. Here is a short extract from that essay:

Besides the grammar-part, wherein we are allowed to be very defective, th[ose persons] will observe many gross improprieties, which however authorized, and grown familiar, ought to be discarded

Undoubtedly, there were others like Swift. The following is part of a resolution which was adopted by the Royal Society in 1664:

... there were persons of the Society whose genius was very proper and inclined to

improve the English tongue, particularly for philosophic purposes, it was voted that there should be a committee for improving the English language.

For the most part the desire for the correction of English lay with two other groups, who overlapped considerably. These were teachers and journalists (or, rather, the eighteenth century equivalent thereof). The feature that joined them together was the realisation that there was considerable profit to be made, especially from the new middle classes, many of whom came from families who were either non-literate or scarcely literate. Much of this no doubt due to the Industrial Revolution, although long-term effects were also important, in particular the rise of printing and the continuing urbanisation of England.

In order that I might demonstrate to you that this is a phenomenon which is not merely an eighteenth century matter, but one which pervades both professions today, take the following quotation from the American journalist John Simon:

Thus the worthy Irving Howe writes ... about "main protagonists." [note the misplaced quotation marks! – RMH] Now, the protagonist is *the* main actor in something and has, since Greek times, always been in the singular. "Protagonists" is incorrect (unless you refer to the protagonists of two or more dramas, and "main protagonists" (main main actors) is redundant to boot.

It would be tedious to spend time on correcting the errors. Let me simply refer you to the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Fowler's classification of the plural as an absurd use may be challenged on the grounds that derivation from Greek *πρωτος* *first*, does not preclude a plural form and limitation to the singular is strictly relevant only in the context of ancient Greek drama.

The point of this is not to attack 'prescriptive linguistics'. Rather, what I want to bring to your attention is how this exemplifies the codification of a standard language. In the past decade or so the codification of Standard English reached an interesting peak with the publication of the Kingman Report (1988) the consequent Cox Report (1988-89), and the consequent development of the National Curriculum.

Again, I don't want to tackle such thorny questions today. Instead, let me ask you one immediate question to ask, and then I shall pose a future question which it is worth asking now. The immediate question is:

Are we sure we know what Standard English is?

and the future question is:

Will Standard English survive?

We have already seen that Standard English is not a necessary aspect of English (since between, say, the Norman Conquest and the rise of printing there was scarcely even a faint approximation to a Standard). We have also seen that Standard English, like any other variety, is not only subject to internal linguistic change, but it is also subject to social change (as in the shifts from System 1 to System 2 and then System 3).

Indeed, in terms of social change, we need not have looked so far back. Consider, for example, the pronunciation of the gerundive in *hunting, shooting and fishing*. The pronunciation of that as *in'* has almost died out. Similarly, the pronunciation of *off* as *orf* is equally outdated. The first of these may be the result of competition within the Standard, but the second seems to have been the result of contact with non-standard dialects, presumably from northern dialects. Another

feature which raises little comment is the insertion of a glottal stop before a consonant such as /p/ at the end of a word, i.e., *stop* is pronounced as /stoʋ p/. Note that this is distinct from the feature which is common to the local dialects of the two capitals of this country, i.e. Edinburgh and London, where glottal stops substitute for /t/ between vowels.

This feature, called preglottalisation, is particularly interesting, because it is common among Standard speakers, particularly younger Standard speakers, and reports suggest that it is not socially stigmatised. There are, apparently, signs that younger Standard speakers are even able to use glottal replacement at the end of words, that is to say, they are able to replace final /t/ by /ʌ/ in words such as *hot*.

This development, which does remain stigmatised by older speakers, is one of the signs of "Estuary English". It may well be due to the influence of the local London dialect, but since glottal replacement is found also in East Anglia, the term "Estuary English" seems especially apt. Glottalisation and "Estuary English" also reminds us of another recent change, by which /l/ is diphthongised in words such as *milk* to give /mlɔk/. This change, perhaps less than a hundred years old, originated in local London English, but is now reported amongst some younger speakers of Standard.

Although I am not entirely clear what John Honey was intending by his remarks to your 1997 Conference, but amongst his comments was the following:

Whether these Estuary features matter is debatable: my point is that English is now the international language spoken or learnt by two billion people, and *serious problems of clarity can arise from exactly these uses* [my italics: RH].

I do not think I should comment on the sentence that follows this:

In the past twelve months several hundred people have died in three major air crashes attributed to failed communication in English between pilot and ground control.

Other than to point out that one might ask whether he is being wilfully ignorant or deliberately misleading. There is a more interesting issue. Let us accept that a major identifying feature of Estuary English is the vocalisation of /l/, the change by which /l/ becomes a vowel sound which forms a diphthong the preceding stressed vowel, as in *milk*. Then us now assume that that results in unclarity.

So far, so good. But at this point we should remember something else. One of the oddest features of standard English is that it is what is called non-rhotic. That is to say, in words such as *fair* there is no final /r/. Most standard varieties of English, for example, Scottish or American English are rhotic, having preserved final /r/. Ask any American here for their judgment about American dialects which are non-rhotic, for example New York City. Certainly, for Scottish speakers, the merger of the three words *poor*, *pore* and *paw* is an unambiguous loss of clarity. So standard English has no monopoly on clarity.

Another question for you, therefore: *is standard English more or less clear than other dialects of English?*

Whatever your answer, there is a more interesting point. The loss of /r/ certainly originated in south-eastern or eastern England, and perhaps dates from soon after 1800. If we were to ask whether or not the loss might have further repercussions, then the obvious place to look is at /l/ in similar contexts. In other words the loss of /l/ would be parallel to the loss of /r/, and, indeed, in terms of systematic distribution, it is altogether desirable. The pass has already been sold with the loss of /r/. It is worth, therefore, recalling something else that John Honey said to you:

... the truth is that constant change occurs in only the non-essentials of language, and stability and continuity are observably more important than change

Nothing could be further from the truth, and such a claim could only be made by someone ignorant of the basics of historical linguistics.

I want now to turn to the question of grammatical adequacy. One of the claims which is often made for standard English is that it is more adequate than non-standard dialects. This was again an implication of Honey's talk to you in 1977. And, as usual, he loses the plot. In order to substantiate my claim, I want to look briefly at an important piece of syntax in present-day English.

One of the core elements as a language such as English is its personal pronoun system. Because of long-term change in the English pronominal system, the standard language has lost a critical element of the system, namely the ability to distinguish singular and plural forms the second person pronoun: for both we have to use *you*. What happens in non-standard dialects? If we leave aside those dialects which still cling on to *thou*, which are in any case fast disappearing, what we find is rather interesting. Many many dialects have created new pronouns: here is a selection:

you all, y'all, yiz, youse, youse yins, y'uns, you guys, you lot

None of these have become Standard, although it might be that in Standard American *you guys* may be nearest to achieving that status. Such forms have, of course, arisen precisely because the standard language is inadequate in this core area.

So another question for you is: *does standard English cope adequately with core features of the language?*

Interestingly, if we reflect back on John Honey's earlier claim about stability, then another core feature gives food for thought. One of the central areas of English syntax is the auxiliary verb system. But over the last few decades some key structures have become or are becoming lost for younger standard speakers, as in:

\*Mary mayn't go to the party

\*I oughtn't to say that

This loss is already complete in at least one form, although southern dialect speakers use it as a matter of course. My example comes from Trollope:

But Mary, my dear, ain't you old enough ...

I must stop almost at once, but firstly I want to point out a serious flaw in the arguments presented by most British linguists, although generally not by Americans. This is the British habit of distinguishing between *accent* and *dialect*. I have to say that, from a linguistic point of view, the distinction is fundamentally flawed. It is a matter of regret, for me, therefore, that it has entered the vocabulary of discussions about standardisation. It only muddies the waters.

The second point I want to make before I finish is to emphasise that I have no problem with standard English. At no point in this talk have I attempted to denigrate the standard. As is my wont, my only aim has been to point out a few of the fallacies which are often expressed about the standard. What I want to share with you are the issues created by these fallacies. Only in that way can there be an informed argument.

But finally another two questions and an anecdote. Consider the following forms:

- a        The cats need feeding
- b        The cats need fed

The first question is: *which of these forms is standard?*

Now the anecdote. When at primary school, one of my sons showed me some work which had been corrected by his teacher. There was a large red cross against the sentence *The cats need fed*, which amused us, since he knew very well that that was the only option that I had, and it was a construction which he had picked up from me — even my wife, who speaks standard southern English, has picked up the Scots construction.

My final question, therefore, is this. Should Scottish children who move to England be required to learn the English forms, either *the cats need feeding* or the more formal *the cats need to be fed*. If so, how do you teach school teachers to teach such arcane linguistic features. Perhaps, you say, it's part of learning standard English. OK, if so, what should happen if an English child moves to Scotland, and writes *the cats need feeding*? Should that be corrected to *the cats need fed*?

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This is a selected list of books on the topics I discuss this lecture. Please note that the number of asterisks is

intended to show the degree of difficulty.

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