I must start with a sincere apology for not being with you in person to deliver this paper, and thanks to Professor Foster-Cohen for agreeing to present it on my behalf at the very last minute. I’m afraid the debate with Professor Aitchison will be a little one-sided with my corner of the ring totally empty, but I don’t honestly think there are many issues on which we disagree so I don’t think the fight would have been a very exciting one anyway.

My intention in this presentation is to discuss the current educational context of the debate between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to Standard English - by which I mean the educational context within the United Kingdom. I recognise that this does not directly affect those who are teaching English as a foreign language, who will certainly continue to teach Standard English as before, but recent changes have produced a situation in the UK which is rather interesting in its own right. In brief, I shall suggest that Standard English is now highly codified as far as non-native speakers are concerned, but not at all codified for native speakers; that codification for natives is not yet on the government’s agenda, but may suddenly appear there in the near future; and that it will not be difficult when it does appear.

1. What is Standard English?

The reason why it will be easy to codify Standard English is that the variety is already quite well defined. It is the kind of English which includes all the forms in the left-hand column, and none of those in the right-hand column. Most of the examples are familiar, but I included the last one for the sake of the French context to show that Non-Standard English, at least in its spoken form, is more like French with its invariant n’est-ce pas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Non-standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I did it</td>
<td>I done it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come quickly!</td>
<td>Come quick!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... the book that I bought ...</td>
<td>... the book what I bought ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... those books ...</td>
<td>... them books ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t break it</td>
<td>I never broke it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t break anything.</td>
<td>I didn’t break nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We started first, didn’t we?</td>
<td>We started first, isn’t it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The linguistic characteristics of Standard English are more or less clear - I return below to the unclarities - and have been described in great detail in a series of monumental descriptive grammars. Each of the differences involves alternative words for the same meaning, with one form clearly Standard and one or more others clearly Non-standard. These linguistic features are
highly correlated with one another, in the sense that the presence of one Standard feature is a strong predictor of the other features, and likewise for the Non-standard features. The Standard features form one bundle, and the Non-standard ones form another bundle.

These bundles of highly correlated linguistic features also correlate strongly with a number of social characteristics. Roughly speaking, Standard is the kind of English which is:

1. written in published work,

2. spoken in situations where published writing is most influential, especially in education (and especially at University level),

3. spoken ‘natively’ (at home) by people who are most influenced by published writing - the ‘professional class’.

The fact is that I have never heard any of the non-standard forms used in a university lecture or seminar, or in a conference paper. This is a very strong claim, and may well be an idealisation of a situation which is a little more complex, but there is certainly a very strong correlation between Higher Education and the Standard English bundle of features.

On the social distribution of Standard, we can go a bit further than this.

1. First, Standard is probably spoken natively by about 10% of the population. This is a guestimate by Peter Trudgill on the basis of his work in Norwich, and it fits well with the results of a study that a colleague and I did a few years ago for a government department. We found that about 30% of a selection of school children were capable of speaking for several minutes without using any Non-standard features; but since this speech was produced in a rather formal school context it sets the upper limit for those who speak Standard natively at home.

2. Secondly, Standard can be combined with many different accents, including regional accents. According to Trudgill again, only about 2% of the UK population speaks with an RP accent, so the remaining Standard speakers must have a more or less regional pronunciation.

3. My third point is that the differences between Standard and Non-standard are very few, involving:

4. a tiny proportion of the words in any passage

5. only about 20 very specific areas of grammar

   The points where Standard English grammar is different from Non-standard are in fact very few - I once wrote that they could be listed on one side of A4, and Randolph Quirk thinks the same, so even if I’m wrong I’m in good company.

1. Fourthly, Non-standard includes many regional variations, such as the difference between those dialects which suppress all subject-verb agreement in favour of the -s form and those which keep the bare verb stem:

   1. I like it and He like it in East Anglia, contrasting with

   2. I likes it and He likes it in parts of the West and North.

4. And lastly, there are a few areas of uncertainty in the definition of Standard, but these are quite specific, and mostly affect the spoken forms. There are regional variations
(especially between the Scottish and English Standards) and there are variations which suggest change in progress. For example, the old form *He and I did it* is giving way - indeed, has given way - to the very odd form *Him and me did it*.

These five issues are matters of objective fact which can be studied as part of descriptive linguistics - they do not raise questions about who is right and who is wrong, or about who has the right to adjudicate. This is what we turn to now.

### 2. Authority and codification

Most European languages have some kind of official codification, in the sense of a document that carries some authority with native speakers on points of disputed usage. English doesn’t. Some people swear, or used to swear, by Gowers’ *Modern English Usage*, but I haven’t even got a copy of it, and I think I’m typical. So English is a very untypical European language in that respect, but it is also totally atypical in another series of respects.

1. It is the world’s ‘lingua franca’, used by (perhaps) 300 million L2 speakers, learned at school by billions, and dominating international communications.

2. It is the only language whose L2 speakers and learners far outnumber its native speakers.

3. It is the only language whose experts can become sterling millionaires by writing books! I personally know three of them, and no doubt there are more.

The demand for EFL books, including descriptive grammars, is what drives grammar-writers and publishers, so English is very heavily codified for **non-native learners**. For these people Non-standard English is of no interest, so the grammars don’t mention it.

For **L1** speakers, though, the situation is very different. It is true that we have **dictionaries**, and that these do have authority - indeed their authority seems to be on a par with the authority of the Bible, to judge by the linguistic fact that we refer to ‘the dictionary’ as though it was a unique work; for instance Scrabble players are constrained by what is in ‘the dictionary’. But how far does this authority extend? **Spelling**, yes - but not much else, in spite of the wealth of semantic and grammatical information. I suspect that very few people consult dictionaries and accept their authority on meaning or grammar. Apart from dictionaries, what authoritative statements about Standard English are there which meet the needs of native speakers? Where, for example, would you go for a definitive list of the differences between Standard and Non-standard for use in schools?

This is the topic of the next section: what is happening to English teaching in our schools. Just a couple of warning notes: by ‘English teaching’ I mean English as a first language - certainly not EFL, but I am also ignoring the important question of English as an Additional Language for linguistic minority children. And by ‘our schools’ I mean schools in the UK except for Scotland, which has its own education system.

### 3. The situation in UK schools (except Scotland)

As you probably know, our education system has gone through a major revolution during the last two decades, resulting in much greater central control over the curriculum (among other things). A move from anarchy to order can never be pain free, and there has been a good deal of pain and argument over the National Curriculum. The debate has brought to the surface differences of opinion which have no doubt coexisted more or less peacefully for a long time, but these differences turned out to be especially profound in the curriculum for English, to the extent that the published curriculum for this subject had an extra revision in 1995 in addition to the regular
ten-year revision that all subjects went through (in 1999).

The arguments in English involved two main questions. One does not concern us here: the canon of literature that schools are obliged to teach. The other one does concern us, as it is the teaching of grammar. Crudely speaking, the debate circled round three alternatives. Some politicians wanted prescriptive grammar teaching - largely, one suspects, because they could not imagine any other kind; some teachers argued for no grammar teaching; and some teachers and educationalists recommended descriptive grammar teaching. It’s nice to be able to tell a story with a happy ending, so I’m glad to be able to report to you that the descriptive grammarians won.

Unlike the first two versions of the National Curriculum, there is nothing in the 1999 version which suggests that children should be discouraged from using Non-standard, except in contexts where Standard is needed; nor is the word ‘correct’ ever used as a synonym for Standard. On the other hand, it is very clear that the children must be taught Standard English and when to use it, as we shall see in a minute. Personally I think this approach is much better than either of the alternatives, but it raises the interesting question of exactly what is Standard English (in contrast with Non-standard), and when is it used? As I have said already, these are questions which can be answered on the basis of research, and there is a good deal of relevant research, but it has never been brought together for the use of teachers and other native speakers who need to know.

Returning to the National Curriculum, it will be helpful to make these rather general comments clear by quoting the most directly relevant parts of the document. The Curriculum for English, like those for other subjects, is organised into three parts by age-group: 5-7, 7-11 and 11-16. But it is also divided into three areas: speaking and listening; reading; and writing. Each of the following quotations therefore refers to what should be taught in one of these areas to children of one of the three age-groups. I shall insert a few comments, mostly but not all of them critical:

1. Age 5-7:

   "Pupils should be introduced to some of the main features of spoken standard English and be taught to use them."

Comment: There is a small note in the margin which makes the only attempt in the whole document to define exactly what this means:

   1. When teaching standard English it is helpful to bear in mind the most common non-standard usages in England:

   2. subject-verb agreement (*they was*)

   3. formation of past tense (*have fell* [sic], *I done*)

Comment: We all know that *have fell* is not a past tense, but there is what could politely be called a ‘knowledge deficit’ in grammar within the official bodies that define the curriculum; a very odd situation indeed, to which I return below.

   1. formation of negatives (*ain’t*)

   2. "Pupils should be taught some of the grammatical features of written standard English."

3. Age 7-11:
4. "Pupils should be taught the grammatical constructions that are characteristic of spoken standard English and to apply this knowledge appropriately in a range of contexts."

Comment: Notice that this implies a broad and comprehensive coverage; I personally doubt if anyone has a list of these grammatical constructions against which they could check progress.

1. "Pupils should be taught:

2. how written standard English varies in degrees of formality [for example, differences between a letter to a friend about a school trip and a report for display],

3. some of the differences between standard and non-standard English usage, including subject-verb agreement and use of prepositions."

Comment: Again notice the odd selection of examples - why these two patterns rather than, say, past-tense forms or negatives?

1. Age 11-16:

2. "To speak fluently and appropriately in different contexts, adapting their talk for a range of purposes and audiences, including the more formal, pupils should be taught to:

3. .... use spoken standard English fluently in different contexts ...

4. "Pupils should be taught to use the vocabulary, structures [sic] and grammar of spoken standard English fluently and accurately in informal and formal situations."

Comment: What is the difference between ‘structures’ and ‘grammar’?

1. "Pupils should be taught about how language varies, including:

2. the importance of standard English as the language of public communication nationally and often internationally, ...

3. " the vocabulary and grammar of standard English and dialectal variation ..."

Comment: Notice how Non-standard dialectal variation is included here as an object of study, not something to be proscribed.

1. "Pupils should be taught about the variations in written standard English and how they differ from spoken language, and to distinguish varying degrees of formality, selecting appropriately for a task."

This list includes nearly all the references to Standard English in the National Curriculum; the ones I have omitted simply duplicate these. You’ll have to take my word for it that there are no proscriptions of Non-standard, and that the teaching method which is recommended in the supporting literature is quite enlightened - for example, there is a lot of emphasis on exploring grammar in little ‘research projects’ rather than didactic instruction. But that is another story.

4. Conclusions

I shall now draw together the two main threads of what I have said. My first point was that English is a peculiar language because non-natives are treated better by grammarians than natives are. Standard English is highly codified for foreign learners by commercial publishers.
But at present it is not at all codified for UK learners. At one time linguists might have argued that this doesn’t matter, because we don’t need a description of our own language; such descriptions are of purely scientific interest. But that argument was always a bad one because Standard English is not the native language of about 90% of the population in the UK (and I imagine the situation is similar in other English-speaking countries).

Which brings me to my second point, that recent changes in our education system have focussed on the need to teach Standard English to this 90% of non-natives, rather than (as in the past) simply to exhort them to use it. But how can our English teachers teach it if they don’t know what it is? We all know that simply being a native speaker of English is not a qualification for setting up as an EFL teacher; however well you speak it, you also have to know about it so that you can explain it, plan a syllabus, and so on. The same is surely true of Standard English in the UK: even a teacher who speaks it natively (not all of them do) needs some knowledge of the content, which implies a list of topics and grammatical points to teach. As we have seen, even the civil servants who draft the curriculum in Whitehall don’t know much about grammar: they can’t tell a past tense from a present perfect, nor do they have a clear picture of what the most important distinctive features of Standard English are. In short, the time seems to be ripe for another fundamental shift in British culture, this time towards a clear codification of Standard English for the benefit of native speakers. As I have pointed out, there are actually very few points where Standard and Non-standard are different, so it would be quite a small job, but a job that someone needs to do. A nice little job for linguists, in fact.