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Standard English: what it isn't

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There is a reasonably clear consensus in the sociolinguistics literature about the term *standardised language*: it refers to a language which has one variety which has undergone standardisation. *Standardisation*, too, appears to be a relatively uncontroversial term, although the terminology employed in the discussion of this topic is by no means uniform. I have defined standardisation (Trudgill, 1992) as consisting of the processes of language determination, codification and stabilisation. Language determination “refers to decisions which have to be taken concerning the selection of particular languages or varieties of language for particular purposes in the society or nation in question” (p.71). Codification is the process whereby a language variety “acquires a publicly recognised and fixed form”. The results of codification “are usually enshrined in dictionaries and grammar books” (p.17). Stabilisation is a process whereby a formerly diffuse variety (in the sense of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985) “undergoes focussing and takes on a more fixed and stable form” (p.70).

It is therefore somewhat surprising that there seems to be considerable confusion in the English-speaking world, even amongst linguists, about what *Standard English* is. One would think that it should be reasonably clear which of the varieties of English is the one which has been subject to the process of standardisation, and what its characteristics are. In fact, however, we do not even seem to be able to agree how to spell this term – with an upper case or lower case *s* – a point which I will return to later. And the use of the term by non-linguists appears to be even more haphazard.

In this paper I therefore attempt a characterisation of Standard English. It should be noted that this is indeed a characterisation rather than a strict definition – language varieties do not readily lend themselves to definition as such. We can describe what Chinese is, for example, in such a way as to make ourselves very well understood on the issue, but actually to define Chinese would be another matter altogether. My characterisation will be as much negative as positive – a clearer idea of the nature of Standard English can be obtained by saying what it is not, as

well as by saying what it is. My discussion of this topic will also be both a sociolinguistic and a linguistic discussion. (But it will be specifically linguistic: the word “ideology” will not appear in this paper). And it will also, I hope, be informed by references from time to time to the nature of standard and nonstandard varieties in language situations beyond the English-speaking world.

Standard English is not a language

Standard English is often referred to as “the standard language”. It is clear, however, that Standard English is not “a language” in any meaningful sense of this term. Standard English, whatever it is, is less than a language, since it is only one variety of English among many. Standard English may be the most important variety of English in all sorts of ways: it is the variety normally used in writing, especially printing; it is the variety associated with the education system in all the English-speaking countries of the world, and is therefore the variety generally spoken by those who are often referred to as “educated people”; and it is the variety taught to non-native learners. But most native speakers of English in the world are native speakers of some nonstandard variety of the language, and English, like other Ausbau languages (see Kloss, 1967), can be described as consisting of an autonomous standardised variety together with all the nonstandard varieties which are heteronomous with respect to it, i.e. dependent on it (Chambers and Trudgill, 1997). **Standard English is thus not *the* English language but simply one variety of it.** This much is uncontroversial.

Standard English is not an accent

There is one further point about Standard English on which most linguists, or at least British linguists, do appear to agree, which is that **Standard English has nothing to do with pronunciation.** From a British perspective, we have to acknowledge that there is in the UK a high-status and widely described accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP). This accent is sociolinguistically unusual, when seen from a global perspective, in that it is not associated with any specific geographical area. It is rather a purely social accent associated with speakers from upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds from all parts of the country, or at least of England.

All RP speakers speak Standard English, but it is widely agreed that the reverse is not the case, in the sense that many Standard English speakers do not have an RP accent. Perhaps 9%-12% of the population of Britain (see Trudgill and Cheshire, 1989) speak Standard English with some form of regional accent. It is true that in most cases Standard English speakers do not have “broad” local accents, i.e. accents with large numbers of regional features which are phonologically and phonetically very distant from RP; but in principle we can say that, while RP is in a sense standardised, it is simply a standardised accent of English and not Standard English itself. This point becomes even clearer if we adopt an international perspective: Standard English speakers can be found in all native English-speaking countries, and it goes without saying that they speak Standard English with different, non-RP accents depending on whether they come from Scotland or the USA or New Zealand or wherever.

Standard English is not a style

In spite of this level of agreement, however, there is unfortunately considerable uncertainty in the minds of many people about a number of other issues. For example, there is some confusion about the relationship between Standard English, on the one hand, and the *vocabulary associated with formal varieties of the English language*, on the other.

We characterise *styles* (see Trudgill, 1992) as varieties of language viewed in relation to *formality*. Styles are varieties of language which can be ranged on a continuum from very formal to very informal. Choice of style usually reflects the formality of the social situation in which they are employed – which is not to say, however, that speakers are “sociolinguistic automata” (Giles, 1973) who respond blindly to the particular degree of formality of a social situation. On the contrary, speakers are able to influence and change the degree of formality of a social situation by manipulation of stylistic choice.

All the languages of the world appear to demonstrate some degree of stylistic differentiation in this sense, reflecting the wide range of social relationships and social situations found, to a greater or lesser extent, in all human societies. I believe, with Labov (1972), that there is no such thing as a single-style speaker, although it is obviously also the case that the repertoire of styles available to individual speakers will be a reflection of their social experiences and, in many cases, also their education. It is of course important here to distinguish between individual speakers of

languages and those languages themselves, but it is clear that languages too may differ similarly in the range of styles available to their speakers. In many areas of the world, switching from informal to formal situations also involves switching from one language to another. In such cases, it is probable that neither of the two languages involved will have the full range of styles available to speakers in monolingual situations.

English as it is employed in areas where it is the major native language of the community, such as in the British Isles, North America and Australasia, has the fullest possible range of styles running from the most to the least formal. This obviously does not mean to say, however, that all speakers have equal access to or ability in all styles, and it is generally accepted that one of the objectives of mother-tongue education is to give pupils exposure to styles at the more formal end of the continuum that they might otherwise not gain any ability in using.

Stylistic differences in English are most obvious at the level of lexis (vocabulary). Consider the differences between

Father was exceedingly fatigued subsequent to his extensive peregrination.

Dad was very tired after his lengthy journey.

The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip.

Although one could argue about some of the details, we can accept that these three sentences have more or less the same referential meaning, and thus differ only in style – and that the stylistic differences are indicated by lexical choice.¹ It is also clear that native speakers are very sensitive to the fact that stylistic variation constitutes a cline (continuum): some of the words here, such as *was*, *his* are stylistically neutral; others range in formality from the ridiculously formal *peregrination* through very formal *fatigued* to intermediate *tired* to informal *trip* to very informal *knackered* and tabooed informal *bloody*. It is often the case that the most informal or “slang” words are regionally restricted; here, *knackered* and *bloody* are unknown or unusual in North American English.

¹ Formality in English is not necessarily confined to lexis, however. Grammatical constructions vary as between informal and formal English – it is often claimed, for instance, that the passive voice is more frequent in formal than in informal styles.

As far as the confusion between formal styles and Standard English is concerned, let us look at the examples given above. The sentence

The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip

is clearly and unambiguously Standard English. There are, it is true, people who assert otherwise. But notice what difficulties this gets them into. To maintain, as they do, that swear words like *bloody* and very informal words like *knackered* are not Standard English puts them into a very awkward position. Is it really the case that speakers suddenly switch out of Standard English as soon as they start swearing? Are Standard English speakers not allowed to use slang without switching into some nonstandard variety? The fact is that Standard English is no different from any other (nonstandard) variety of the language. Its speakers have a full range of styles open to them, just as speakers of other varieties do, and can swear and use slang just like anybody else.² Equally, **there is no need for speakers of nonstandard varieties to switch into Standard English in order to employ formal styles**. The most logical position we can adopt on this is as follows:

The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip

is a Standard English sentence, couched in a very informal style, while

Father were very tired after his lengthy journey

is a sentence in a nonstandard (north of England, for instance) variety of English, as attested by the nonstandard verb form *were*, couched in a rather formal style.

It is true that, in most English-speaking societies, there is a tendency – a social convention – for Standard English to dominate in relatively formal social situations. But there is no necessary connection here, and we are justified in asserting the theoretical independence of the parameter standard–nonstandard from the parameter formal–informal. This theoretical independence becomes clearer if we observe sociolinguistic situations outside the English-speaking world. There are many parts of the world where speakers employ the local dialect for nearly all purposes, such as Luxembourg, Limburg in the Netherlands, and Norway. In such situations, a visit to the Town Hall to discuss important local political

² It will be clear that I do not agree with the contention which is sometimes heard that “nobody speaks Standard English”.

problems with the mayor will not elicit a switch to Standard German or Dutch or Norwegian, but it will produce styles of greater formality than those to be found on a Friday night in the local bar amongst a group of close friends. Stylistic switching occurs *within* dialects and not *between* them.

Standard English is not a register

We use the term *register* in the sense of a variety of language determined by topic, subject matter or activity, such as the register of mathematics, the register of medicine, or the register of pigeon fancying. In English, this is almost entirely a matter of lexis, although some registers, notably the register of law, are known to have special syntactic characteristics. It is also clear that the education system is widely regarded as having as one of its tasks the transmission of particular registers to pupils – those academic, technical or scientific registers which they are not likely to have had contact with outside the education system; and of course it is a necessary part of the study of, say, physical geography, to acquire the register – the technical terms – associated with it.

However, it is an interesting question as to how far technical registers have a technical function – for example, providing well-defined unambiguous terms for dealing with particular topics – and how far they have the more particularly sociolinguistic function of symbolising a speaker or writer's membership of a particular group, and of gate-keeping – that is, keeping outsiders out. Linguists will defend the use of the term *lexical item* rather than *word* by saying that the former has a more rigorous definition than the latter, but it is also undoubtedly true that employing the term *lexical item* does signal one's membership of the group of academic linguists. And it is not entirely clear to me, as a medical outsider, that using *clavicle* rather than *collar-bone* has any function at all other than symbolising one's status as a doctor rather than a patient.

Here again we find confusion over the term Standard English. Those involved in outlining English Language curricula for British schools have been known to refer to “Standard English vocabulary”. It is not at all clear, however, what this could possibly mean. I have argued above that it cannot refer to vocabulary associated with formal styles. Is it perhaps supposed to mean vocabulary associated with academic or technical registers? If so, this would not make sense either, since the question of

register and the question of standard versus nonstandard are also in principle entirely separate.

It is of course true that in English-speaking societies it is most usual to employ Standard English when one is using scientific registers – this is the social convention. But one can certainly acquire and use technical registers without using Standard English, just as one can employ non-technical registers while speaking or writing Standard English. There is, once again, no necessary connection between the two. Thus

There was two eskers what we saw in them U-shaped valleys

is a nonstandard English sentence couched in the technical register of physical geography.

This type of combination of technical register with a nonstandard variety is much more common in some language communities than others. In German-speaking Switzerland, for example, most speakers use their local nonstandard dialect in nearly all social situations and for nearly all purposes. Thus it is that in the corridors of a Swiss university, one may hear two philosophy professors discussing the works of Kant using all the appropriate philosophical vocabulary together with the phonology and grammar of their local dialect.

It would of course be possible to argue that their philosophical vocabulary is not an integral part of their native nonstandard Swiss German dialects and that the professors are “switching”, or that these words are being “borrowed” from Standard German and being subjected to phonological integration into the local dialect, as loan words often are. This, however, would be very difficult to argue for with any degree of logic. All speakers acquire new vocabulary throughout their lifetimes. There seems no reason to suppose that technical vocabulary is the sole prerogative of standard varieties. Nor does it make sense to argue that while it is possible for nonstandard dialect speakers to acquire new non-technical words within their own nonstandard dialect, it is sadly by definition impossible for them to acquire technical words without switching to the standard variety. After all, dialects of English resemble each other at all linguistic levels much more than they differ – otherwise interdialectal communication would be impossible. There is no reason why dialects should not have most of their vocabulary in common as well as most of their grammar and most of their phonology. If the Swiss example tells us anything, it tells us that **there is no necessary connection between Standard English and technical registers.**

So what is it then?

If Standard English is not a language, an accent, a style or a register, then of course we are obliged to say what it actually is. The answer is that **Standard English is a dialect**. As we saw above, Standard English is simply one variety of English among many. It is a sub-variety of English. Sub-varieties of languages are usually referred to as *dialects*, and languages are often described as *consisting of* dialects. It is true that Standard English is an unusual dialect in a number of ways. It is by far the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view; and it does not have an associated accent. But as a named dialect of English like Cockney, or Scouse, or Yorkshire, it is also entirely normal that we should spell the name of this dialect with capital letters.

Dialects of English, as of other languages, are generally simultaneously both geographical and social dialects which combine to form both geographical and social dialect continua. How we divide these continua up is most often linguistically arbitrary, although we do of course normally find it convenient to make such divisions, and to use names for dialects that we happen to want to talk about for a particular purpose *as if* they were discrete varieties. It is thus legitimate and usual to talk about Yorkshire dialect, or South Yorkshire dialect, or Sheffield dialect, or middle-class Sheffield dialect, depending on what our particular objectives are.

Standard English is unusual, seen against this background, in a number of ways. First, the distinction between Standard English and other dialects is not arbitrary or a matter of slicing up a continuum at some point of our own choice, although as we shall see below there are some difficulties. This is inherent in the nature of standardisation itself. There is really no continuum linking Standard English to other dialects because the codification that forms a crucial part of the standardisation process results in a situation where, in most cases, a feature is either standard or it is not.

Secondly, unlike other dialects, Standard English is a purely social dialect. Because of its unusual history and its extreme sociological importance, it is no longer a geographical dialect, even if we can tell that its origins were originally in the southeast of England. It is true that, in the English-speaking world as a whole, it comes in a number of different forms, so that we can talk, if we wish to for some particular purpose, of

Scottish Standard English, or American Standard English, or English Standard English. And even in England we can note that there is a small amount of geographical variation at least in spoken Standard English, such as the different tendencies in different parts of the country to employ contractions such as *He's not* as opposed to *he hasn't*. But the most salient sociolinguistic characteristic of Standard English is that it is a social dialect. It is a dialect which, like other English dialects, has native speakers.³ In Britain, these native speakers constitute about 12%-15% of the population; but this small subsection of the population does not just constitute a random cross-section of the inhabitants. These speakers are very much concentrated at the top of the social scale; and the further down the social scale one goes, the more nonstandard forms one finds.

Standard English has always had native speakers. Historically, we can say that Standard English was selected (though, unlike many other languages, it was not selected by any overt or conscious decision) as the variety to become the standard variety precisely because it was the variety associated with the social group with the highest degree of power, wealth and prestige. Subsequent developments have reinforced its social character, particularly the fact that it has been employed as the dialect of an education to which pupils, especially in earlier centuries, have had differential access depending on their social class background.

Standard English is not a set of prescriptive rules

When it comes to discussing the linguistic characteristics of Standard English, it is obvious from our discussion above that the differences between Standard English and other dialects cannot be phonological, and they do not appear to be lexical either (though see below). It therefore follows that Standard English is a social dialect which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its *grammatical* forms.

We have to make it clear, however, that these grammatical forms are not necessarily identical with those which prescriptive grammarians have focussed on over the last few centuries. Standard English, like many other Germanic languages, most certainly tolerates sentence-final prepositions, as in *I've bought a new car which I'm very pleased with*. Standard

³ This is not necessarily the case with standard varieties of all languages. The variety of Standard Norwegian called Nynorsk, for instance, was constructed on the basis of a combination of Norwegian dialects and is primarily used in writing. Modern Standard Arabic is also said to have no actual native speakers.

English does not exclude constructions such as *It's me* or *He is taller than me*. And native Standard English speakers in general do not observe other pseudo-logical “rules” invented by prescriptivists (and American copy-editors), for reasons best known to themselves, involving forced usage distinctions between words such as *that* and *which*, or *as* and *like*, or *further* and *farther*. A good rule of thumb is that if a particular grammatical structure is proposed as “correct” by prescriptivists, then this is a sure sign that native speakers do not use it.⁴

Grammatical idiosyncrasies of Standard English

Grammatical differences between Standard English and other dialects are in fact rather few in number, although of course they are very significant socially. This means that, as part of our characterisation of what Standard English is, we are actually able to cite quite a high proportion of them.

Standard English has most of its grammatical features in common with the other dialects. When compared to the majority nonstandard dialects, however, it can be seen to have idiosyncrasies which include the following

1. Standard English fails to distinguish between the forms of the auxiliary verb *do* and its main verb forms. This is true both of present tense, where many other dialects distinguish between auxiliary *I do*, *he do* and main verb *I does*, *he does* or similar, and the past tense, where most other dialects distinguish between auxiliary *did* and main verb *done*, as in *You done it, did you?*
2. Standard English has an unusual and irregular present tense verb morphology in that only the third-person singular receives morphological marking: *he goes* versus *I go*. Many other dialects use either zero for all persons or *-s* for all persons.
3. Standard English lacks multiple negation, so that no choice is available between *I don't want none*, which is not possible, and *I don't want any*. Most nonstandard dialects of English around the world permit multiple negation.

⁴ For example, no prescriptivist has yet proposed a rule for English that adjectives come before nouns.

4. Standard English has an irregular formation of reflexive pronouns, with some forms based on the possessive pronouns, e.g. *myself*, and others on the objective pronouns, e.g. *himself*. Most nonstandard dialects have a regular system employing possessive forms throughout: *hisself*, *theirselves*.
5. Standard English fails to distinguish between second person singular and second person plural pronouns, having *you* in both cases. Many nonstandard dialects maintain the older English distinction between *thou* and *you*, or have developed newer distinctions such as *you* versus *youse*.
6. Standard English has irregular forms of the verb *to be* both in the present tense (*am, is, are*) and in the past (*was, were*). Many nonstandard dialects have the same form for all persons, such as *I be, you be, he be, we be, they be*, and *I were, you were, he were, we were, they were*.
7. In the case of many irregular verbs, Standard English redundantly distinguishes between preterite and perfect verb forms. Unlike many dialects which differentiate these simply by using auxiliary *have* – *I have seen* versus *I seen* – Standard English employs both the auxiliary *have* and distinct preterite and past participle forms – *I have seen* versus *I saw*.
8. Standard English has only a two-way contrast in its demonstrative system, with *this* (near to the speaker) opposed to *that* (away from the speaker). Many other dialects have a three-way system involving a further distinction between, for example, *that* (near to the listener) and *yon* (away from both speaker and listener).

Indeterminacy

There are, however, some interesting problems concerning the nature of Standard English. One of these has to do with its grammatical characteristics. Standard English, like all dialects, is subject to linguistic change. In some cases, change is internally generated within the dialect; but there is also a tendency for forms to spread from nonstandard dialects into the standard – a very common process (cf. Trudgill, 2008) which is hardly surprising given that standard speakers are heavily outnumbered in the community by nonstandard speakers. Ongoing linguistic changes

mean that it is not always possible to say with any degree of certainty in this dynamic situation whether a particular feature is part of Standard English or not. Since it is possible for nonstandard features to become standard (and indeed vice versa), it follows that there may be a period of time when a form's status may be uncertain or ambiguous, with differences appearing between older and younger speakers. For example, most Standard English speakers now employ *than* as a preposition with a following object pronoun, rather than as a conjunction, in constructions such as

He is bigger than me (vs *He is bigger than I*)

But not all of them, at least for the time being, use it in this way in

He is bigger than what I am

where the status of *than* as a preposition is indicated by the nominalisation with *what*.⁵

Similarly, American Standard English currently admits a new verb *to got* in

You haven't got any money, do you?

but not (or not yet) in

You don't got any money, do you?

which does occur in some other dialects.

Another aspect of indeterminacy has to do with the theoretical independence, as noted above, of Standard English, on the one hand, and style, on the other. This independence is real enough, but it does not always mean that there are not problems in individual cases of distinguishing between the two, as Hudson and Holmes (1995) have pointed out. For example, I regard the use of *this* as an indefinite in narratives as in

There was this man, and he'd got this gun... etc.

⁵ I.e. *what I am* has been converted into a noun phrase.

as a feature of colloquial style, but other linguists might regard it as a nonstandard grammatical feature.

And there is also an issue to do with lexis. I argued above that there is no necessary connection between formal or technical vocabulary and Standard English. That is, there is no such thing as Standard English vocabulary. There is an interesting sense, however, in which the situation is rather more complex than that. We can illustrate this in the following way. It is clear that there is such a thing as *nonstandard* vocabulary. For instance, in the nonstandard dialect of Norwich, England, there is a verb *to blar* which means ‘to cry, weep’. Not only is this verb regionally restricted to the dialects of this part of the country, it is also socially restricted – the small proportion of the population of Norwich who are native speakers of Standard English do not normally use this word, although they are perfectly well aware of what it means. This means that there is a sense in which we can say that *to cry* is a Standard English word, whereas *to blar* is not. However, *cry* is by no means *only* a Standard English word, since there are very many other nonstandard dialects elsewhere in which it is the only word available with this meaning, and even in the working-class nonstandard dialect of Norwich, *to cry* is a perfectly common and frequently used word. Because Standard English is not geographically restricted to any particular region, its vocabulary is available to all. There are also, of course, many cases in which Standard English speakers in different parts of Britain employ different but equivalent words, such as Scottish English *press* versus English English *cupboard*; and hundreds of cases in which the vocabulary of English Standard English and American Standard English differ, as is very well known. Any usage by educational planners of the term “Standard English vocabulary” in the sense of vocabulary that occurs in the Standard English dialect and no other does not therefore actually make very good sense.

Conclusion

From an educational point of view, the position of Standard English as the dialect of English used in writing is unassailable.⁶ As far as spoken Standard English is concerned, we could conclude that the teaching of Standard English to speakers of other dialects would be commendable – if for no other reason than the irrational but pervasive discrimination which is currently and unfortunately exercised against nonstandard-

⁶ It should be added, however, that Standard English has nothing whatsoever to do with spelling or punctuation.

dialect speakers in most English-speaking societies.⁷ Whether teaching spoken Standard English is actually possible, however, I am rather inclined to doubt, for sociolinguistic reasons: Standard English is a social-class dialect, and non-native speakers of the dialect are unlikely to start speaking it unless they wish to become associated with that particular social group and believe that there is a chance of doing so. If they do, they are likely to acquire spoken Standard English anyway, regardless of what happens in the classroom (see Trudgill, 1975).

Either way, however, the most important message I have been trying to convey in this piece is that there is no necessary connection whatsoever between the teaching of formal styles and technical registers, on the one hand, and the teaching of the standard dialect, on the other.

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⁷ It would not, in my view, be overly utopian to hope in the long run for societies in which this kind of linguistic bigotry is no longer acceptable, just as racism and sexism have in my lifetime become unacceptable.

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