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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*: a standardised language is a language one of whose varieties 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 myself 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' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.: 17). Stabilisation is a process whereby a formerly diffuse variety (in the sense of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985:70) 'undergoes focussing and takes on a more fixed and stable form'.

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. Also, the use of the term by non-linguists appears to be even more haphazard.

In this chapter, 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. The characterisation will also

be as much negative as positive—a clearer idea of what Standard English is can be obtained by saying what it is not as well as by saying what it is. My discussion of this topic will be both a sociolinguistic and a linguistic discussion. (But it will be specifically linguistic: the word 'ideology' will not appear again in this chapter.) And it will also, I hope, be informed by references from time to time to the nature of standard and non-standard 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 of English 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 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 (Chambers and Trudgill 1997) as consisting of an autonomous standardised variety together with all the non-standard varieties which are heteronomous with respect to it. Standard English is thus not *the* English language but simply one variety of it.

Standard English is not an accent

There is one thing about Standard English on which most linguists, or at least British linguists, do appear to be agreed, and that is that Standard English has nothing to do with pronunciation. From a British perspective, we have to acknowledge that there is in Britain a high status and widely described accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP) which is sociolinguistically unusual when seen from a global perspective in that it is not associated with any geographical area, being instead a purely social accent associated with speakers in all parts of the country, or at least in England, from upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. It is widely agreed, though, that while all RP speakers also speak Standard English, the reverse is not the case. Perhaps 9 per cent-12 per cent 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 it is clear that in principle we can say that, while RP is, in a sense,

standardised, it is a standardised accent of English and not Standard English itself. This point becomes even clearer from an international perspective. Standard English speakers can be found in all English-speaking countries, and it goes without saying that they speak this variety 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

There is, however and unfortunately, considerable confusion in the minds of many concerning the relationship between Standard English and the vocabulary associated with formal varieties of the English language. We characterise *styles* (see Trudgill 1992) as varieties of language viewed from the point of view of *formality*. Styles are varieties of language which can be arranged on a continuum ranging from very formal to very informal. Formal styles are employed in social situations which are formal, and informal styles are employed in social situations which are informal— which is not to say, however, that speakers are 'sociolinguistic automata' (Giles 1973) who respond blindly to the particular degree of formality of a particular 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 would 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, is a language which 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. Consider the differences between the following:

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. It is also clear that native speakers are very sensitive to the fact that stylistic variation constitutes a cline: 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 will be observed that, as is often the case, the most informal or 'slang' words are regionally restricted, being in this case unknown or unusual in North American English. It will also be observed that there are no strict co-occurrence restrictions here as there are in some languages—one can say *long journey* and *lengthy trip* just as well as *lengthy journey* and *long trip*.

Formality in English is, however, by no means confined to lexis. 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—and, as has been shown by many works in the Labovian secular linguistics tradition, starting with Labov (1966), phonology is also highly sensitive to style.

As far as the relationship between style, on the one hand, and Standard English, on the other, is concerned, we can say the following. The phonological sensitivity to stylistic context just referred to obviously has no connection to Standard English since, as we have noted, Standard English has no connection with phonology.

Let us then examine lexis. I would like to assert that our sentence

   The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip.

is clearly and unambiguously Standard English. To assert otherwise—that swear words like *bloody* and very informal words like *knackered* are not Standard English—would get us into a very difficult situation. Does a Standard English speaker suddenly switch out of Standard English as soon as he or she starts swearing? Are Standard English speakers not allowed to use slang without switching into some non-standard variety? My contention is that Standard English is no different from any other (non-standard) variety of the language. Speakers of Standard English 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. (It will be clear that I do not agree with the contention which is sometimes heard that 'nobody speaks Standard English'.) Equally, there is no need for speakers of non-

standard 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 non-standard (north of England, for instance) variety of English, as attested by the non-standard 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 perhaps—for Standard English to dominate in relatively formal social situations, but there is no necessary connection here, and we are therefore justified in asserting the theoretical independence of the parameter standard-non-standard 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 much of Norway. In such situations, a visit to the respective Town Hall to discuss important local political 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 Friday night in the local bar amongst a group of close friends. Stylistic switching occurs *within* dialects and not *between* them.

This theoretical independence of the notion of Standard English from style does not mean that there are not problems in individual cases of distinguishing the two, as Hudson and Holmes (1995) have pointed out. For example, I tend to regard the use of this as an indefinite in narratives as in

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

as a feature of colloquial style, but other linguists might regard it as a non-standard grammatical feature.

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 exclusively 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 physical geography.

It is, however, an interesting question as to how far technical registers have a technical function—that of, 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, as it were, keeping outsiders out. Linguists will defend the use of '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*. The National Curriculum document for English in England and Wales (DfE/WO 1995) talks frequently about 'Standard English vocabulary'. It is not at all clear what this can mean. I have argued above that it cannot mean '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 non-standard are also in principle entirely separate questions. It is of course true that it is most usual in English-speaking societies to employ Standard English when one is using scientific registers—this is the social convention, we might say. 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 non-standard English sentence couched in the technical register of physical geography.

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

and that the professors are 'switching' or that these words are being 'borrowed' from Standard German and being subjected, as loan words often are, to phonological integration into the local dialect. 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, or that while, if you are a non-standard dialect speaker, it is possible to acquire new non-technical words within your own non-standard dialect, it is sadly by definition impossible 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 they 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 therefore a language, an accent, a style or a register, then of course we are obliged to say what it actually is. The answer is, as at least most British sociolinguists are agreed, 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. As a named dialect, like Cockney, or. Scouse, or Yorkshire, it is entirely normal that we should spell the name of the Standard English dialect with capital letters.

Standard English is, however, an unusual dialect in a number of ways. It is, for example, 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.

It is also of interest that 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 also most often linguistically arbitrary, although we do of course find it convenient normally to make such divisions and 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 have seen 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.

Second, 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. (Bizarrely, the British National Curriculum document suggests that American and Australian English are not 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.

At least two linguists have professed to find this statement controversial. Stein and Quirk (1995) argue that Standard English is not a social-class dialect because the *Sun*, a British newspaper with a largely working-class readership, is written in Standard English. This argument would appear to be a total non-sequitur, since all newspapers that are written in English are written in Standard English, by middle-class journalists, regardless of their readership.

Stein and Quirk also fly in the face of all the sociolinguistic research on English grammar that has been carried out in the last quarter of the twentieth century (see for example Cheshire 1982). Standard English is a dialect which is spoken as their native variety, at least in Britain, by about 12 per cent–15 per cent of the population, and this small percentage does not just constitute a random cross-section of the population. They are very much concentrated at the top of the social scale (or, as some would prefer, 'the very top'). The further down the social scale one goes, the more non-standard forms one finds.

Historically, we can say that Standard English was selected (though of course, unlike many other languages, not 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: 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.

So far we have not discussed grammar. When, however, it comes to discussing what are the linguistic differences between Standard English

and the non-standard dialects, it is obvious from our discussion above that they cannot be phonological, and that 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.

Standard English is not a set of prescriptive rules

We have to make it clear, however, that these grammatical forms are not necessarily identical with those which prescriptive grammarians have concerned themselves with 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*. And Standard English does not exclude constructions such as *It's me* or *He is taller than me*.

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 of course has most of its grammatical features in common with the other dialects. When compared to the non-standard 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 forms, 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 non-standard dialects of English around the world permit multiple negation.
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 non-standard dialects have a regular system employing possessive forms throughout, i.e. *hisself, theirselves*.

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5   Standard English fails to distinguish between second-person singular and second-person plural pronouns, having *you* in both cases. Many non-standard 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 non-standard 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 both by the use of the auxiliary *have* and by the use of distinct preterite and past participle forms: *I have seen* versus *I saw.* Many other dialects have *I have seen* versus *I seen.*

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).

Linguistic change

There is also an interesting problem concerning which grammatical forms are and are not Standard English which has to do with linguistic change, in general, and the fact that, in particular, there is a tendency for forms to spread from non-standard dialects to the standard. Just as there are some difficulties in practice in distinguishing between features of non-standard dialect and features of colloquial style, as was discussed above, so there are difficulties associated with standard versus non-standard status and linguistic change. Given that it is possible for non-standard features to become standard (and vice versa), it follows that there will be a period of time when a form's status will be uncertain or ambiguous. For example, most Standard English speakers are happy to accept the new status of *than* as a preposition rather than a conjunction in constructions such as:

He is bigger than me.

but less happy, for the time being, to do so in:

He is bigger than what I am.

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?

Non-standard lexis

I have argued above that there is no necessary connection between formal vocabulary 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 this is not entirely true. We can illustrate this in the following way. It is clear that there is such a thing as *non-standard* vocabulary. For instance, in the non-standard 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 non-standard dialects elsewhere in which it is the only word available with this meaning, and even in the working-class non-standard 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 in any case also, of course, many cases in which Standard English speakers in different parts of England employ different but equivalent words, and hundreds of cases in which the vocabulary of English Standard English and American Standard English differ, as is very well known. The usage in the National Curriculum of the term 'Standard English vocabulary' in the sense of 'vocabulary that occurs in the Standard English dialect and no other' thus remains problematical.

Conclusion

From an educational point of view, the position of Standard English as the dialect of English used in writing is unassailable. (We should perhaps add, however, that it has nothing whatsoever to do with spelling or punctuation!) As far as spoken Standard English is concerned, we could conclude that the teaching of Standard English to speakers of other dialects may be commendable—as most would in theory agree, if for no other reason than the discrimination which is currently exercised against non-standard dialect speakers in most English-speaking societies—and may also be possible—which

I am inclined, for sociolinguistic reasons (see Trudgill 1975) to doubt. Either way, however, there is clearly no necessary connection at all between the teaching of formal styles and technical registers, on the one hand, and the teaching of the standard dialect, on the other.