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WHAT IS STANDARD ENGLISH?

Introduction

In Britain, Standard English is a central issue of language in education, since Standard English is a variety of language which can be defined only by reference to its role in the education system. It is also an example of a topic which requires careful conceptual analysis, since there is enormous confusion about terms such as 'standard', 'correct', 'proper', 'good', 'grammatical' or 'academic' English, and such terms are at the centre of much debate over English in education. A major role for linguistics is the steady unpicking of unreflecting beliefs and myths about language, especially where such beliefs affect the lives of all children in schools.

Topics in language in education must be approached from four directions.

1. We need a technical linguistic description of the forms of Standard English: for example, its syntax.
2. We need a sociolinguistic theory to explain its functions: how and when it is used.
3. We need an applied analysis of planning and policy: for example, how it should be taught.
4. And we require an ideological analysis of Standard English as a major factor in the ways in which people experience power and control in their lives.

Standard English has to do with passing exams, getting on in the world, respectability, prestige and success. Anyone who expresses such perceptions is also expressing an awareness of the ways in which Standard English reflects the historical and social forces which created and maintain it. Children who have difficulty in using Standard English when the education system demands it, do not talk and write as they do for perverse idiosyncratic reasons of their own, but because their families, friends and communities talk in that way, and because of the historical forces which have created a multi-dialectal English.

Together such forms of analysis (although they are of course by no means complete in this chapter) can contribute to a cultural analysis of the social world we live in, and to the critical and cultural role which English teachers in particular can play in schools.

In this chapter, I will use *Standard English* as a technical term. The term *standard*, as I discuss below, is extremely ambiguous in English, and it is important to be clear that the term *Standard English* has technical meanings which are not derivable directly from the everyday uses of the word.

I will also use the following abbreviations:

SE	Standard English
NS	Non-standard
NSE	Non-standard English
RP	Received Pronunciation

SE in education

Schools are probably the single most important place of contact in our society between speakers of different language varieties: in particular, between speakers of standard and non-standard varieties of English. There are other institutional settings in which there is increasing contact between people who do not share the same norms of language or of language use, but they all tend to be narrow contexts which are crucial for people's life chances: medical, legal, bureaucratic – and educational. Outside such settings, contacts between people are likely to be less formal, and to be between people who share the same language varieties.

An extremely important question therefore, which requires detailed consideration by all educationalists in all English-speaking countries, is what is Standard English?

SE has a central place in the education system, and is in fact partly defined by the place it occupies there. In practice, every time a teacher corrects a pupil's spelling or a grammatical form, some process of standardization is taking place. Teachers need to be very clear about the nature of such corrections: about whether they are correcting spelling, where the issue of standardization is relatively simple and uncontroversial; or whether they are altering a non-standard grammatical form, and effectively trying (probably unsuccessfully and confusingly) to change the pupil's native dialect. In order to avoid confusing such very different types of 'correction', teachers therefore need to be very clear about what SE is. The extent of the confusion possible in this area can be seen when one native speaker of English tells another native speaker that something they have said 'is not English'. Yet how could a native speaker of English be speaking anything but English? This can happen even between two apparently highly educated users of SE, as, for example, when a letter appears in the quality press complaining about some linguistic usage from a BBC newscaster.

Questions of standardization arise essentially because of linguistic variation. There are variants within English, people choose between them, and recommend one variant in preference to another. The issue becomes critical in education when there is a mismatch between the language of the school and the language of the pupil, bearing in mind that the large majority of the population of Britain speak NSE.

The major problem in defining SE precisely is that a very wide range of facts has to be taken into consideration.

- It requires to be defined in a technical linguistic descriptive way, in terms of its phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexis and syntax.
- It requires to be defined sociolinguistically, in terms of the functions it serves in the community and of people's attitudes towards it.
- It requires to be defined historically, in terms of where it came from, who created it, who is still maintaining it, and how it has changed and is still changing.
- And it requires to be discussed from a political and ideological point of view, in terms of its position as a prestige and dominant language variety that helps to maintain hegemonic relations between social classes.

It is related, in particular, to the power and wealth of the educated middle classes and, conversely, is used to exclude others from certain roles and professions. It is quite clear, for example, that success in public examinations, such as O- and A-levels, depends heavily on a mastery of written SE. One may or may not agree that it should: but it does, and teachers must therefore know what such a mastery implies. SE is neither merely a dialect of English, nor a style: it is an intersection of dialectal and functional variation, and this makes it particularly difficult to define.

The power of SE is not, of course, absolute. Most people after all do not speak SE themselves, certainly not all the time. Written SE is marginal in many people's lives. British schools and the wider society are full of many counter-language varieties of resistance. Moreover, working-class varieties of English can have their own prestige as 'tough', 'virile' and the like.

From the point of view of providing teachers with useful information about NS dialects of English, it is unfortunate that we do not have for English in Britain what is available, for example, for German teachers in Germany: contrastive grammars of standard High German and dialects such as Swabian. Ammon and Loewer (1977) simply take it for granted that a high proportion of the population of Germany speak NS dialects, that these dialects may have a long tradition of being highly valued, that pupils nevertheless need to learn the standard language in school, that there will be interference problems in such learning, and that

teachers need succinct and accurate statements of the points of contrast where such interference is likely to occur. As such, this is an extremely useful model to be followed for teachers' aids. My main criticism of their particular book is that it appears to assume a rather simple view of contrastive analysis: that just identifying the points of contrast between language varieties will automatically predict points of difficulty for learners; this has been found not always to be the case with learners of foreign languages. In addition, the authors assume that learning a standard language as a second dialect is the same as learning a foreign language, whereas there are some rather obvious differences. Nevertheless, the contrastive information provided is extremely useful in allowing teachers to distinguish between errors in pupils' work which are genuine mistakes and errors which are due to interference from the native dialect.

It is clear, then, that any serious cultural analysis must include a substantial analysis of SE: what it is in formal linguistic terms, what it does, what its roles in society are, and what are the dominant meanings and values which it carries.

Terms and an initial definition

There are several terms in everyday use which mean approximately what linguists mean by SE. In the USA, the term *Network English* is used, and this is close in intent to the British term *BBC English*. Other British terms are the *Queen's English* and *Oxford English*. Such everyday terms are not very precise, and the last two are rather out of date in their assumptions about sources of prestige in British society. In addition, the last term often refers to an accent (pronunciation), rather than a dialect (vocabulary plus grammar). However, such terms identify a social reality for most people and do no harm, if they are not taken too literally.

There is, however, another term, *Received Pronunciation*, which causes confusion and does not mean at all the same as SE. RP refers to an accent which is socially prestigious, mainly in England. There are certainly other prestige accents, for example in Scotland, where RP may be regarded as slightly odd and affected. Even in England, RP does not have the prestige which it once had. (See Wells 1982 and Gimson 1984 for detailed discussion.) However, the main point here is that RP refers to pronunciation only, whereas SE refers mainly to grammar and vocabulary, and only secondarily to pronunciation. Part of the confusion here arises because of the peculiar relation between RP and SE. All users of RP speak SE: this is not logically necessary, but is an important fact about language and social class in Britain. On the other hand, only a minority of speakers of SE (even in England) use RP. For example, I speak SE with a regional west of Scotland accent. It has been claimed that there is no standard accent of English at all, and that SE is spoken with many different accents across the whole English-speaking world, but I will question extreme statements of this view below.

A natural preliminary definition of SE can be provided simply by listing some of its main uses. This would provide an *ostensive definition*: SE is defined by pointing to clear instances of it. It would also be a *functional definition*, which is a natural type of definition in many everyday cases: try, for example, to define *knife* or *bed* without making any reference to what these objects are used for. SE, then, is the variety of English which is normally used in print, and more generally in the public media, and which is used by most educated speakers most of the time. It is the variety used in the education system, and therefore the variety taught to learners of English as a foreign language. These examples tell any native speaker roughly what is meant by SE. On the other hand, they leave unclear whether SE is a predominantly written variety, and whether it is a prescriptive norm imposed by the education system, or a description of the language which some people actually use as their native language.

The terms *Network English* and *BBC English* are particularly socially revealing. The control of the public media is in the hands of a small social elite. This points to a relationship between the public media, a social-class group and SE. It is impossible to separate the prestige of the media, of the media personalities and of the language they use. SE is therefore a prestige dialect. It is also the variety that is used in formally printed books, and these have their own prestige.

There is one simple, but widespread confusion, which is easily disposed of. In so far as SE is the native language of a social group (the educated middle classes), SE is a dialect, and like any other dialect it has internal stylistic variation. That is, SE may be either formal or casual and colloquial. Thus the following sentences are all SE:

1. I have not seen any of those children.
2. I haven't seen any of those kids.
3. I haven't seen any of those bloody kids.

(The use of the word *bloody* is British rather than American: we will come to that in a moment.) Speakers of SE can be as casual, polite or rude as anyone else, and can use slang, swear and say things in bad taste or in bad style. But this all has to do with questions of stylistic variation or social etiquette, and not with dialect. The following sentence is not SE, however:

4. I ain't seen none of them kids.

It is not incorrect SE: it is simply not SE at all. The double negative, the use of *them* as a demonstrative adjective and the use of *ain't* are all perfectly regular grammatical features of many NS dialects of English. Vocabulary can also be NS. For example, *bairns* for "children" is regionally restricted to dialects in the north of Britain.

Note, then, that we have to avoid formulations that imply that NS dialects are a deviation from SE. This would be both logically and historically inaccurate. NS dialects are linguistic systems in their own right. Note also that I am not assuming the existence of 'pure' or 'genuine' dialects, spoken (in the stereotypes of many people) by old rural inhabitants. There are urban and rural, standard and non-standard dialects: everyone speaks some dialect.

Different aspects of standardization

I have pointed out briefly so far that there is stylistic variation within SE, but otherwise I have discussed SE as though it was equally standardized throughout. This is, however, obviously not the case: certain levels of SE are much more standardized than others, and it has been argued (although I will question this below) that some levels are not standardized at all.

The most obviously and uncontroversially standardized level of SE is spelling. Standard spellings are simply listed in the major dictionaries. There are of course two major forms of standardization, British and American, but these two norms cannot themselves be mixed with each other. Otherwise, with very few exceptions (for example, *judgement*, *judgment*), there is just one way to spell each word, there are no variants in normal usage, and the standard spellings just have to be learned. It is easier to standardize written than spoken English, since it is easier to bring it under conscious control. In addition, spellings have no direct analogue in the spoken language (not even in phonology), and can therefore remain relatively unaffected by unconscious spoken behaviour.

Conversely, for accent or pronunciation there is no single standard and SE can be spoken with a range of accents. In a series of influential statements on SE, Trudgill (e.g. 1974, 1975; Hughes and Trudgill 1979; Trudgill and Hannah 1982) has defined SE as a dialect, involving lexis and grammar, but not pronunciation. For example, Trudgill (1984a: 32) writes:

> SE ... is a set of grammatical and lexical forms which is typically used in speech and writing by educated native speakers. It follows, therefore, that SE is a term that does not involve phonetics or phonology, although, of course, accents do differ considerably in social status.

Trudgill's definitions always place primary emphasis on SE as a social dialect, and, although they usually mention accent and diatypic function, I do not think they give sufficient weight to these aspects of language, nor to people's own perceptions of SE. For example, he goes on to admit (1984a:3 2) that in fact SE occurs normally only with 'milder' regional accents. But this already seems to undermine the claim that phonetics and phonology are not involved in people's ideas of SE. Apart from anything else, the very fact that there are such things as

elocution lessons, which focus on accent, means that people have an idea of what is and what is not standard in pronunciation. Elocution lessons are one way in which people try to change other people's accents (although they are not as prevalent as they once were) and are therefore one mechanism, however insignificant in practice for the language as a whole, of linguistic standardization.

Coates (1982) has argued in detail, however, that even if we admit that there is no standard accent for English, there are nevertheless standard pronunciation features: that is, the range of permissible accents which Trudgill seems to have in mind all share invariant features. Two examples of NS pronunciation features are: a *t*-sound pronounced as a glottal stop between vowels in words such as *butter*; and *h*-deletion word-initially on lexical words such as *house*. These features are themselves variable, such that a low percentage of glottal stops might not even be noticed at all, but above a perceptual threshold the accent will be perceived as NS. Similarly, all speakers delete word-initial *h* on unstressed grammatical words (e.g. *has*, *his*) in informal conversation, but deletion on stressed lexical words is perceived as NS. (Deletion of word-initial *h* is extremely complex historically in English: see Stubbs 1980: 35-40.)

Given that there is a very large area of common ground between SE and NS dialects, it might be better even in the area of syntax to talk of NS syntactic features, rather than of NS English per se. Such terminology would also reflect the fact that speakers may not consistently use either standard or nonstandard forms: they will typically occur variably. Having said that, it is then possible to characterize SE negatively, at the syntactic level, by simply listing NS syntactic forms. The following all occur widely throughout NS British dialects and are not restricted to any one particular geographical region. This list is based on fuller lists in Trudgill (l984a) and Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens (1984).

1. Multiple negation.

   I didn't do nothing.

2. *Ain't* as a negative form of *be* or auxiliary verb *have*.

   I ain't doing it. I ain't got one.

3. *Never* used to refer to a single occasion in the past.

   I never done it. (SE*: I didn't do it.)*

4. Extension of third-person –s to first and second-person verb forms.

   I wants, you wants, he wants.

5. Regularization of *be*.

We was, you was, they was.

6. Regularization of some irregular verbs.

I draw, I drawed, I have drawed.
I go, I went, I have went.
I come, I come, I have come.

7. Optional -*ly* on adverbs.

He writes really quick.

8. Unmarked plurality on nouns of measurement after numerals.

twenty year, ten pound.

9. Different forms of the relative pronoun.

The man as/what lives here.

10. Regularization of reflexive pronouns.

myself, yourself, hisself, herself; ourselves, yourselves, theirselves.

11. Distinction between main and auxiliary verb *do*.

*You done it, did you? (*SE*: You did it, did you?)*

Note that the last case shows very clearly that we are dealing with a different rule-governed NS system, and not with 'sloppy' or 'incorrect' usage. First, the NS dialect shows a distinction which is not marked in SE. Second, in neither SE nor NS dialects can one say **You done it, done you*?

The above list is an over-simplified list of features, which are geographically widespread. There are of course many other such features, some regionally restricted. Also, some of the features listed occur higher up the social-class scale than others. The list is also over-simplified in that it implies the existence of an extreme or idealized NS dialect, whereas individuals vary in the extent to which they use dialect features and use such features variably in different contexts.

SE as a social dialect

Although the NS features listed above are widespread within Britain, they are nevertheless British, rather than American. One of the most important defining characteristics of SE is that it is not regionally restricted. There is slight regional variation between the SE used in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England, but very much less than in NS varieties. In fact, there is a remarkably uniform international SE. Again, there are small differences among the standard varieties used in Britain, North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The differences in vocabulary and grammar, however, are surprisingly minor, given its very large number of speakers, its very wide geographical spread, and the large common core shared by all these standard languages. One might, for example, read a newspaper article without knowing whether it was printed in New York, London or Sydney: the only clue might be occasional words for local places or artefacts (barring spelling differences). Trudgill and Hannah (1982) provide a summary of such differences between all the varieties of SE in the world.

It follows that SE is not a regional dialect. It is a *social dialect*: that dialect which is used by all educated speakers, at least for some purposes, and some people have it as their native language. It is intuitively obvious that there is much more variation in the English used by working-class people than by middle-class people. (This is much less marked for other languages, for example, German, especially if Austrian and Swiss speakers are included.) Thus business people or teachers from London, Glasgow, Sydney and San Francisco would have little, if any difficulty in understanding each other, and the most noticeable differences in their language would be in accent, not in dialect. But farm labourers from south-west England, north-east Scotland and the Appalachians would speak very differently and might have considerable difficulty in understanding each other: although they might shift towards SE to facilitate communication. Trudgill (1975 and elsewhere) illustrates the relation between social and regional diversity as a triangle without its apex (see figure 5). That is, as we move up the social-class scale, there is less regional variation in dialect, although even at the very top there is still a little.

SE and diatypic functions

However, SE is not just a dialect: it is used for particular diatypic functions. There is a particular relationship between SE and its uses in written language. This, in turn, relates to the relatively small amount of variation within SE. Spoken English is more variable than written English, due to a convention that written English is formal. A simple example of this convention is the restriction against forms such as *don't*, *doesn't* and *isn't* in printed books. It is not an absolute constraint, but a strong tendency.

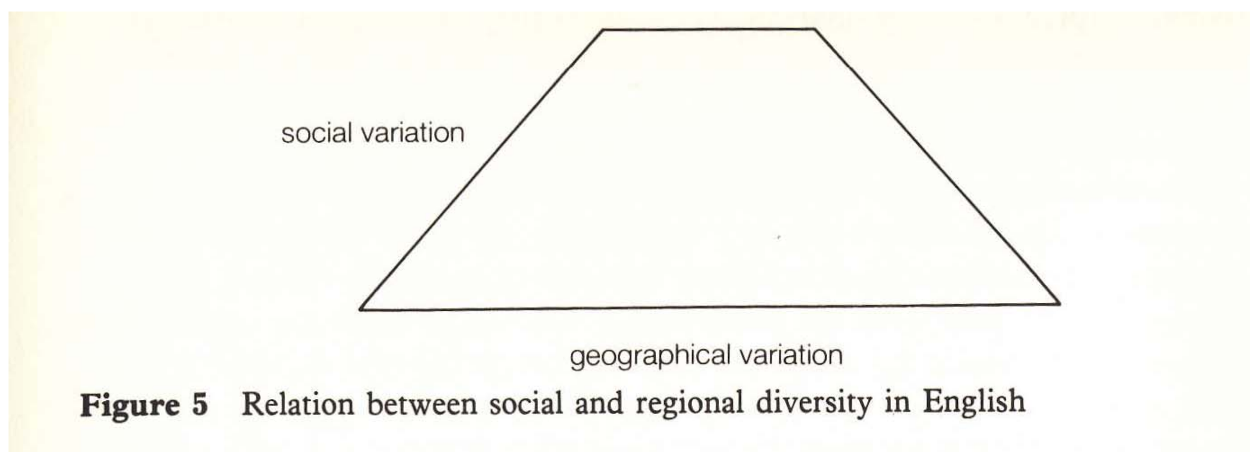

Figure 5 Relation between social and regional diversity in English

Here is a slightly different way of discussing the relationships. There is a strong tendency, in many areas, to talk in terms of dichotomies, such as *standard* versus *non-standard*, or *written* versus *spoken*. However, both of these pairs of terms label large classes, and collapse together several different dimensions, which typically co-occur, but which are logically independent and can vary independently. The main dimensions are as follows:

written	spoken
formal	casual
public	private
planned	spontaneous
non-interactive	participatory
not co-present	face-to-face
standard	non-standard

Most written language is formal: this is a strong social convention, and certainly the most formal written language is more formal than any spoken language. But there are, of course, informal personal letters: we are talking about typical correlations of features, not deterministic relations. Again, most written language is public (i.e. published) and most spoken language is private, although there are private letters and public debates. Most written, certainly almost all published, language is planned, edited and redrafted, whereas most spoken language is composed spontaneously as it is spoken. However, there are mixed modes, such as lectures, which may be based on previously written language, even if they are not just written language read aloud. Most written language is non-interactive: it is a monologue in so far as the reader cannot break in and interrupt or give feedback, whereas most spoken language is participatory dialogue. However, written communication between individuals sitting at separate computer terminals may be interactive, spoken language on television or radio cannot be interrupted,

and many lectures are only marginally participatory. In typical spoken communication, the participants are face-to-face and visible to each other, whereas in written communication writer and reader are not co-present: but children can pass written notes to each other in class, and speakers on the telephone are not face-to-face. Similarly, speakers are usually co-present at the same moment in time: although new technology in the form of telephone answering machines has altered the possibilities even here.

It is also frequently claimed that written language is typically more explicit than other language, and there is clearly some plausibility in this observation. This is of particular interest to teachers, since the aim of making things explicit is central to education. However, the claim is not at all straightforward, since explicitness is not a function of a particular piece of language in the abstract: it is not an intrinsic property of texts, but of texts in context. A text that is perfectly clear and explicit to one reader may be unclear and obscure to another, since explicitness depends on the purpose of a text, and on assumptions about what the audience knows about the subject matter. One can never say everything about anything. Explicitness therefore depends on a balance between what can be assumed and what needs to be said. A related formulation is the claim that written language is context-free, whereas spoken language is context-dependent. But, of course, even formal, written journal articles and the like make many assumptions about what their readers already know. The confusion here is often that written texts do not depend on their context of production (it does not matter to the reader that I am writing this particular text in the south of Germany – I am as it happens): but what is crucial is the context of reception. (Nystrand 1983b discusses this common confusion in detail.)

Finally, SE will be seen to be associated with the written-formal-public ends of the various dimensions. Again, these are correlations which represent a particular socio-cultural view of the functions of SE, rather than a deterministic view of language. (Similar dimensions to those above are discussed by Brazil 1969; Rubin 1980.)

The very strong social conventions that all printed English is standard means that only occasional examples of dialect poetry or some kinds of community writing in NSE (see Gregory 1984), get into print. Examples of dialect poetry by writers such as Robert Burns or William Neill for Scots or by James Berry or Linton Kwesi Johnson for Caribbean creole are as striking as they are rare. If a language is highly standardized, this implies in fact that it has a written form. This is because standardization implies deliberate codification and planning of the language by dictionary makers, grammar-book writers and the like. This brings us again to the special relation between SE and the education system, for it is the education system which is a powerful instrument for promoting such codified norms of language.

People, including dictionary makers and schoolteachers, observe what they think is good usage. This may well be a mixture of local prejudice about what is a 'good' accent, sometimes outdated norms of educated usage, and notions of written or even literary usage, which may be inappropriate to spoken language. On this basis, they may formulate rules which can become quite rigid. Once established, such rules can become self-perpetuating. SE is used by prestigious people for prestigious purposes. The prestige of the people rubs off on the language, and the circle continues. SE, the social élite who use it, and the public functions which it serves become inseparable.

For many people, the social practices which have created SE, in particular over the past 250 years, have been lost to sight. For example, the actual means of production of dictionaries is a total mystery to most people. They are treated as given, not constructed. Dictionaries just exist and are treated as sources of impersonal authority: words can be looked up in the dictionary to settle disputes, although people have really no idea where dictionaries come from or who makes them. (Despite a certain amount of publicity which has been given recently to Robert Burchfield as editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the source of his authority remains implicit.) This is part of the hegemonic power of SE. It is accepted as normal, taken-for-granted reality by many of those who are dominated by it. Children, of course, often have their own sources of resistance against it, in their own forms of counter-language; it may be teachers, however, who do not themselves ever question the source of the system they perpetuate.

If one then asks who standardizes English, the answer can be: almost anyone. Sometimes it is individuals such as Samuel Johnson or Noah Webster; but it is also groups such as secretaries, proof readers, editors, people who write to newspapers to complain about usage on the radio, and ultimately people arguing amongst themselves about the 'correct' pronunciation or meaning of a word. If individual people did not follow the prescriptions of dictionary makers and the like, then dictionaries and grammar books would have no effect.

Probably the major social group ultimately involved in standardizing English is schoolteachers. It has frequently been pointed out that lower-middle-class women are over-represented in the teaching profession. And it is known from sociolinguistic work that lower-middle-class speakers, and women as opposed to men, are often particularly sensitive to prestige norms in language. (See Fasold 1984: ch. 9, for a very clear general discussion of language standardization.)

Dialects and diatypes

In summary, then, what is SE? In chapter 2, I distinguished between dialects and diatypes. I further distinguished between regional, social and temporal dialects; and distinguished between diatypic or functional varieties of language according

to the field, tenor or mode of discourse. I can now therefore define SE, in relation to these definitions, as an intersection of dialectal and diatypic varieties.

SE is closely related to regional dialects spoken in the south-east of England. This looks like a regional definition, but in fact SE is no longer regionally restricted. This is actually a disguised historical definition: SE developed historically out of a dialect used in London, especially in the court. This already implies that SE is a social dialect. Historically, because of the power and prestige of its speakers, SE spread geographically, and is now the social dialect used by the educated middle classes all over Britain, and with only minor variation in other countries. It is also the variety used in education (field of discourse), in formal settings (tenor of discourse), and in print (mode of discourse).

These definitions are not in themselves prescriptive: they describe certain social facts which govern how SE is used. These facts are socially, politically and economically loaded, but I have not passed any judgement in the last paragraph on whether they are desirable or not. However, it is easy to see how the borderline between a prescriptive and a descriptive definition breaks down. The reason for one further confusion should now be clear. SE is prestigious and, because of its speakers and users, it is highly visible. The very fact that it is used in print makes it visible, whereas NS varieties are generally restricted to spoken language. People therefore come to think of SE as *the* language. They confuse one socially prestigious variety with the whole language.

The linguistic view of SE is often misrepresented. It is often said, for example, that linguists argue that SE is just a dialect of English, like any other, with no privileged position. This is not so. It is quite evident that SE holds a special position. What linguists emphasize, however, is that this special position is not due to any inherent linguistic superiority of SE: it is due to a complex of historical, geographical, social, political and functional factors. Linguists do not therefore argue, as they are often held to, that 'all languages are equal', but they argue that the reasons for inequality between language varieties are not inherently linguistic.

The term *standard*

In an extremely useful essay, Williams (1976: 248ff) has analysed the ambiguities in the different everyday uses of the term *standard*. In uses such as *royal standard* or *standard bearer*, the word means a distinctive flag or symbol of authority. In *gold standard*, it means a basic unit of comparison. In *standard foot*, it means an authorized unit of measurement. In *standard size* it means usual or accepted. A *standard work* (for example, on the French Revolution) is an accepted authority. In *standard of living*, the word refers to a level which has been attained in some hierarchy, although here no precise measurement is possible. Similarly, if we talk of *maintaining standards* in education, we talk of assessment or grading, levels of

achievement or competence, although again such things are here not objectively measurable. Note also that *standards* is laudatory, although *standardization* can often be pejorative. So it is not necessarily contradictory to talk of the need 'to maintain standards without standardizing education'. Williams's historical analysis of the shifts in the term also shows that several of its senses are involved in people's complex perceptions of the concept of Standard English, and in the different aspects of standardization discussed in this chapter.

SE in schools

The following pedagogic principles seem to follow from the arguments of this chapter. First, all children must have access to SE, and therefore must be taught it in school, if necessary. If they are not competent in SE, at least for some purposes, then areas of the dominant culture are closed to them. In particular, they need to be competent in written SE. If they are not, then they are not competent in written English itself, and they must also have competence in written language to have access to aspects of the dominant culture. This view is quite compatible with the view that school should be more understanding and tolerant of NS dialects and should be free of dialect prejudice. SE is basically the language of wider, non-regional, public communication, and a basic principle must be that children should be able to communicate along all the lines of communication that are important to them: family, community, education and public life. It follows from this, in turn, that SE must be taught in ways that do not denigrate the native home dialect: this is, of course, one of the most difficult tasks. However, it is crucial to realize that the view that children must learn SE is not at all the same as the view that children should be anglicized (if they are from an ethnic minority group) or that they should assimilate to the dominant, mainstream, middle-class culture (if they are from a working-class group).

All of this, however, still leaves open how such teaching of SE should be done. Two principles which can guide such teaching are as follows. First, teachers clearly have a responsibility to teach children that some forms of language are expected within the examination system, and that other forms will be penalized. If they do not make this explicit to children, then they are not teaching their pupils about one of the major gate-keeping functions of SE. Second, it may be soon enough to begin such teaching a few years before such formal examinations, and explicitly in relation to them. It is debatable how soon is soon enough, but the underlying principle is that early writing is bound to be based on the children's spoken language and is therefore bound to show more variation than is conventional in formal written language. Furthermore, if the conventions of written SE are insisted on too early, then there is the danger that the child has to learn all at the same time: mechanical handwriting skills, spelling, other conventions of written English, and a second dialect. It therefore seems pedagogically correct to allow children to write in language that is closer to their

native spoken dialect than is conventional, until they are confident in writing as such. (Richmond 1982 discusses such issues.)

It is very much more doubtful whether children should be explicitly taught spoken SE. They must be able to understand it, of course; but it is doubtful if schools should try to teach or insist on production in spoken SE. First, such an insistence is unlikely to be successful. Children know that not everyone speaks SE, and an insistence that they should speak it is likely to alienate them from the school or their family or both. In any case, the habits of the spoken language are usually so deeply ingrained that they are impervious to conscious teaching for a few hours a week in school. People need to be very highly motivated in order to change their native dialect. Normally they need to be motivated to join another social group that uses the target language. If children are on good social terms with their teachers, they will shift naturally towards SE when the occasion demands it. Much sociolinguistic work has now shown that children of primary-school age can already adapt their language to different audiences. (See Milroy 1980, for a detailed converse demonstration that it is the most non-standard speakers who have the closest ties with their local community.) Writing depends much more on conscious language behaviour, and is therefore open to explicit teaching in a way in which spoken language is not.

However, it is extremely important that teachers should have enough knowledge of their pupils' native spoken language varieties to allow them to distinguish between genuine mistakes (for example, in spelling) and interference from NS dialects. If both kinds of linguistic feature are merely 'corrected' in the same way, this will at best be confusing for pupils, and at worst will be tantamount to criticizing the native language, which symbolizes their home and community. (Richmond 1982 gives helpful examples.)

Finally, there is a very basic question to which the answer is not yet at all clear. Are the differences between standard and non-standard varieties of English merely surface differences that have purely symbolic value? Or are the differences ever large enough to cause serious comprehension problems? It is clear that some differences are purely of surface form: they annoy many people who take a prescriptive view of language, but would never cause any genuine communication problems (for example, forms such as *we was* are widely condemned as 'wrong', but are understood by everyone). There are other cases, however, where communication problems may arise.

The argument that dialect differences do not cause communication problems is as follows. We can all obviously understand many speakers of different dialects. Many people are bidialectal and can themselves switch between a NS dialect and SE. Most people can recognizes speakers from different parts of the country and can even imitate other dialects to some extent. It is clear that our linguistic competence is not narrowly restricted to one dialect.

The converse argument is that dialect changes are rarely entirely successful, and that even after years of living in a new area, people still cannot imitate the local dialect with complete accuracy. Although we can obviously understand speakers of other dialects, our understanding is irregular and ad hoc, and depends on the contexts as well as on the language alone. By their very nature, failures of communication are likely to go undetected, and there are therefore likely to be many more such failures than we notice. We think we have understood, but we haven't.

As linguists carry out a more detailed analysis on a wider range of dialects, they are starting to question to just what extent speakers of different dialects do share the same linguistic system. It has been argued for example (Milroy 1984), that there are quite profound differences between the systems of tense and aspect in Irish English and in SE, and that these differences can cause serious, but often unnoticed communication failures. It has also been argued (for example, by Edwards 1979) that there are similar problems with Caribbean creoles, due to different tense and aspect marking and also to features such as the lack of overt distinctions between active and passive sentences, and that therefore Caribbean children in Britain may have some comprehension problems with written SE in schools.

Not enough detailed description has yet been done on British dialects to be sure how important or widespread such problems are. However, something which is certain is that modern towns and cities are not speech communities in the classic sense. People who do not share the same dialect are brought together increasingly frequently. Modern industrial urban society is increasingly diverse, with increasing contact between speakers of different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) provides case studies. Misunderstandings do obviously occur in speech events such as meetings, interviews, debates and trials: precisely the kinds of speech events that are crucial for people's life chances. It seems very likely that social life is increasingly full of semiotic mismatches. As the main arena for the contact between standard and non-standard varieties of English, schools therefore have a special responsibility to understand the nature of these differences.

FURTHER READING

Milroy, L. and Milroy, J. (1985) *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardization.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

For the full referencs to the work cited see the original place of publication.