

Standard English?!

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Abstract:

Standard English?! In spite of the fact that linguistics is primarily a descriptive discipline, the notion of a standard language has been hotly debated from various points of view amongst linguists as well as non-linguists for a long time. Discussions tend to conjure up negative associations and value judgments about a low standard in a language. To a great extent, the notion of fixing, refining and cultivating the Czech language was endorsed by the Prague School, for instance. In effect, the role of standard as a *correct* and a prestigious variety is deeply rooted not only in this country, particularly when it comes to education. In a similar vein, debates on the teaching of English have been fierce and numerous in various parts of the English-speaking world, chiefly in Britain and the USA. The current article aims to look at the complex and questionable concept and nature of Standard English. As a matter of fact, it attempts to demystify some of the views held by some authors on Standard English. The article reviews some of the salient features of standards of English. It questions the notion of Standard English as one and only variety as indicated in the title of the paper as well as the non-existence of a language codex. The author draws on the papers of and interviews with both domestic and international scholars.

Key words:

assessment, codification, description, English, prescription, standard

1. Introduction

The widespread use of English all around the globe has in recent times generated considerable interest from the general public as well as language professionals. “There is no linguistic subject more prone to emotional rhetoric or wild exaggeration than the future of English” (Crystal, 1994, p. 26). While non-language professionals frequently hold very strong opinions on linguistic correctness, and are particularly concerned about the future of English, the members of the latter group (language professionals) e.g. linguists, notably sociolinguists, school teachers, radio directors, editors and have a considerable bearing on developing and controlling language-norms. They are the language-norm authority i.e. they play a prominent role “in decisions as to which language forms count as standard”¹ (Ammon, 2015, p. 56). The relationship between the two groups is then somewhat asymmetric. In this connection, evaluative and sometimes highly subjective judgments can have negative implications. It is, for instance, warned that Standard English is on the verge of collapse. The command of Standard English is deteriorating and all this will lead to mutual intelligibility and chaos.

¹ My thanks go to Mgr. Vít Dovalil, Ph.D., for drawing my attention to this article.

Proper English is standard English and unless there is conformity to its norms, chaos will come again, the language will disperse, and we shall indeed be left with nothing. If the centre cannot hold, things will fall apart, and standards of communication, indeed standards of social behaviour in general, will decline. The centre is the standard language, and so if that holds, standards will be maintained. Correctness is ultimately a matter of moral values (Widdowson, 1994a, p. 323).

Opinions are expressed on issues and difficulties pupils, students, and people have in speaking and writing proper English. The issues are then labelled as wrong, incorrect, stilted, inappropriate and suchlike. In other words, the custodians or guardians of one Standard English complain particularly about the ungrammatical structures of the populace as put by Widdowson (1994b, p. 381) and bewail the decline of language culture. In this “complaint tradition” as stressed by the sociolinguists Milroy and Milroy (2003, p. 24) complaints are directed against written and spoken errors with no distinction whatsoever. In short, errors are either criticised and/or it is called for remedies. With all this in mind, one might be under the impression that there was one Standard English, i.e. one single form of language.

2. Starting Points

As touched upon in the introductory part, calls for fixing a standard language can be vocal (see e.g. Milroy – Milroy, 2003). But language can only be fixed and thus stable with reference to the past. Yet language is of its nature unstable and dynamic (see e.g. Kavka, 2009). Similarly, the popular conceptions of one standard and no language codex supported by codification and standardisation are probably far from the current linguistic reality where English is used as a language of global communication (see e.g. Jenkins, 2006). Before turning to the vexed notion of Standard English, it is worth considering the characteristics of standard in general – or rather, standards as they seem to bear similarities across the world. Also, it is worth recalling the frequent starting point of the linguistic inquiry.

First of all, it is imperative to note that for many main stream linguists meaning is use. As it is well-known, whilst prescriptivists request to respect the rules, linguists do not generally judge a use of a word as correct, bad, or wrong. Rather linguists are primarily concerned with language description. This view chimes with international and Czech scholars and is endorsed in virtually all textbooks in linguistics. “All introductory textbooks in linguistics affirm that linguistics is a descriptive discipline and not a prescriptive one” (Milroy – Milroy, 2003, p. 4). “The aim of academic grammar books is description. The prescriptive nature tends to be tolerated rather than endorsed” (Dovalil, 2006, p. 64, translated by JP). When it comes to language analysis, all varieties of language (including non-standard varieties) are equally valid, equally grammatical and equally correct, irrespective of how these varieties are publicly evaluated. As a consequence, many linguists condemn prescription/prescriptivism and it has a particular connotation attached to

it (see e.g. Cameron, 2012). Oftentimes, it is pointed out that the language is unstable, variable and in a state of flux. It is a choice whereas prescriptivism is normative and imposed. Making evaluative and subjective choices about what is good or wrong by a handful of scholars is simply not scientific, and it is not a task of the proper linguist. In particular, the notion of error is frowned upon. “The notion of error is insane. Generations have been subject to this kind of torture since they start school at the age of six” (Čermák, 2009, p. 37, translated by JP).

On the other hand, the role of a prestigious variety is desirable. And ignoring the impact of prescriptive phenomena would be short-sighted. What is questioned is authority in language, i.e. who should decide on the standard and in the wider sense and who forms norms of standard in a language (cf. e.g. Dovalil, 2012). “Language does require a variety that is conceived as prestigious and representative. But where does it say that it should be thought up by a couple of smart linguists” (Čermák, 2010, p. 35, translated by JP). Čermák further notes that idea of fixing and refining language has been backed up by the Prague School, most notably Havránek (see e.g. Nekvapil, 2007). A quick look at *Slovo a slovesnost* journal reveals that standard language still ranks among topical issues. Likewise prescriptivism in British and American English is not showing any signs of slowdown. The prescriptive publications of the nineteenth century have had the implications throughout the twentieth century and the twenty-first century (Hickey, 2012, p. 13).

3. Standards of English

A standard language is a tongue that has moved beyond its region to become national or more recently global (Halliday, 2003, p. 408). As the title of the article suggests, however, the label Standard English is a rather loose, variably, elastic as well as disputable term, and a development of the eighteenth century. More specifically, though people refer to Standard English on a daily basis, there is no agreed-upon definition of what it is. “The term Standard English suggests we all share a similar understanding of what this means but it is not easy to define” (Farrel – Martin, 2009, p. 2). Trudgill (2011, p. 117) notes, too, “[...] there seems to be considerable confusion in the English-speaking world, even amongst linguists, about what Standard English is”. In other words, the concept of standard can be somewhat misleading as it carries certain and sometimes false presuppositions for various people. For instance, Strevens (1985, p. 6, cited in Abbott, 1991, p. 49) asserts:

- that standard English is the English of the numerical majority of English-user,
- that it has some special quality of excellence because, it is believed it is either used by the majority, or it has some official function, rather as Standard French has the imprimatur of Académie française.

Unlike other varieties/dialects, which are frequently stigmatized and may be regarded as negative, standards are first and foremost codified through the written form, and have inherent value. In fact, they are public varieties, i.e. social and

speaker-based, that are designed for institutional purposes; they are, therefore, deemed prestigious and are used as a medium in education, business and administration. Regarding its linguistic characteristics, Standard English refers chiefly to grammar and vocabulary. “The usual way of defining it is in reference to its grammar and lexis: It is a variety, a kind of superposed dialect which is socially sanctioned for institutional use and therefore particularly suited for written communication” (Widdowson, 1994b, p. 380). This variety is primarily of class character and represents a recognized standard of its own in each country (Kavka, 2009, p. 140). Although the term Standard English resists easy definition, Crystal (1994) calls for a clear understanding of the terms and provides five essential characteristics of Standard English:

- is a distinctive variety of English – a distinctive combination of linguistic features with a special role to play and it has no local base;
- includes linguistic features which are chiefly matters of grammar, vocabulary and orthography, not pronunciation;
- carries most prestige within a country;
- is recognized by adult members of the community and is a desirable educational target;
- is widely understood but not widely spoken (Crystal, 1994, p. 24).

For Trudgill (2011) Standard English is not a language but rather a prestigious variety of English; despite the fact that especially lay people associate it with Received Pronunciation or the Queen’s English, BBC English, English of educated people, it is not an accent “there is [...] no such entity as a standard spoken language” (Milroy – Milroy, 2003, p. 21); nor is it a style since Standard English can be used formally and informally “Standard English, no matter in which of its varieties, includes both informal and formal styles” (Kavka, 2009, p. 140); it is not a register; and finally, Standard English is not a set of prescriptive terms.

4. No Language Codex for Native and Non-native Speakers of English?

It is a common fallacy that unlike other European languages, e.g. French and German, English is not institutionally codified. That is, there is no scientific institution regulating or codifying standard, in a sense of document that carries some authority with native speakers on points of disputed usage. Nor are there any dictionaries or grammar books for English that could validly be used for guiding or correcting language behaviour. Rather the standard form is shaped by influential sectors of society, e.g. major publishing houses and media. In effect, the information found in traditional grammar books and dictionaries for the learner of English, for example, is primarily descriptive rather than, strictly speaking, prescriptive. Hudson (2000, p. 2) reminds us that most European languages have some kind of official codification, while English doesn’t. In his paper aimed at teachers of English teaching English to native speakers in UK schools (except for Scotland) Hudson recognizes the

issues of power. “The demand for EFL books, including descriptive grammars, is what drives grammar-writers and publishers, so English is very heavily codified for non-native speakers” (Hudson, 2000, p. 2). Hudson concludes that English is not at all codified for UK learners as opposed to non-native speakers. Baron (2000, p. 20) notes that traditional grammar books and dictionaries of English have defined their task to be encoding the principles underlying formally the “correct” written grammar. Consequently, it is sometimes believed that “correct” denotes written language. Baron (2000, p. 20) goes on to say that the situation is nonetheless changing as more and more linguists are coming to suggest that the grammar of spoken language is sufficiently distinct from that of the prescriptive norm; that spoken language merits its own (written) grammar. As can be seen, the situation may vary with respect to native and non-native speakers of English. Still, for all of the above, it might follow that English has no language codex.

5. Myths

In relation to Standard English couple of comments need to be made. Though nourished by the impression of the extensive pluricentricity of English (see e.g. Kachru, 2000), the need for language purity and cultivation seems natural but goes against the grain of liberty of English speakers including those (e.g. Samuel Johnson) who in a way represented the Academy (Kavka, 2009, p. 23). Equally, it must be noted that the mere absence (or presence) of a state agency or Academy controlling language norms does not at all rule out the presence of a language codex, however blurring the term language codex may be; on the contrary. Rather, I am more inclined to agree with Ammon (2015) who questions such fuzzy notions and concepts as a language codex and asserts “that language corrections can effectively be defended on the basis of certain dictionaries being called authoritative, which would be sufficient proof for the existence of a language codex” (Ammon, 2015, p. 61).

Furthermore, a linguistic characteristic of Standard English, namely the notion of a standard pronunciation, can be questioned. According to Trudgill (2011) Standard English has nothing to do with accent. As mentioned earlier, one variety of Standard English does not reflect the linguistic reality. Rather it seems there are prestigious varieties across the English-speaking world. For Crystal (1994, p. 21) the notion of a “standard pronunciation” is useful in the international setting of English as a second or a foreign language in particular, but here too there is more than one model – chiefly, British Received pronunciation and US General American. This view is in contrast with what we are seeing less and less in modern classrooms and textbooks where students are frequently encouraged and exposed to a large variety of native as well as non-native accents, not necessarily standard ones.

Finally, central to the notion of Standard English is assessment. Leaving aside the extensive body of general literature dealing with design and interpretation of tests, assessment is criticised with regard to the linguistic adequacy of language tests. Tests focusing on spoken language are regarded as artificial and ignore stigmatized spoken norms. To illustrate, candidates are penalized for using conversational ellipsis

(Milroy – Milroy, 1999, p. 140). Here the authors refer to tests for native speakers of English. In my own experience, this view is far from the current reality in tests intended for non-native speakers of English. In oral Cambridge examinations and tests, for instance, candidates are given special credit for applying a natural response, e.g. situational ellipsis, or are not penalized. “Spoken language often involves false starts, incomplete utterances, ellipsis and reformulation. Where communication is achieved, such features are not penalised” (Cambridge Handbook for Teachers, 2014, p. 84).

To conclude, continual debates over such complex concepts as standard in a language, prescriptivism, Standard English, a language codex, and assessment in relation to education, can be thought-provoking. Of course, the binary oppositions presented in this paper, e.g. native speaker vs non-native speaker, prescriptivists vs descriptivists, linguists vs non-linguists cannot account for all the challenges. However, a distinction needs to be made with regard to the target groups. Here I only attempted to scratch the surface of the complexities of the phenomena. While there is no agreement on the terms and notions, they are frequently questioned and targeted from various points of view and it would be short-sighted to overlook them. As aptly put by Mathesius, “language is a fortress that must be attacked from all sides and by all means” (Vachek, 1972, p. 69).

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