Varieties of English

An introduction to the study of language

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with
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Symbols

Words or phrases quoted as linguistic examples are printed in *italics*.

A symbol in pointed brackets, e.g. ⟨d⟩, refers to its use as a letter in written English.

A symbol or word in slanting brackets, e.g. /u:/, /peg/, refers to sounds or pronunciation in spoken English, and uses the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (see chapter 4).

In transcribing conversation, pauses are shown in round brackets, either in terms of their approximate length in seconds, e.g. (2.0), or as a momentary break, or micropause (.). When an overlap of speaking turns occurs, the place where the overlap begins is shown as //.

The symbol ∅ indicates a deleted element.

Note to teachers and lecturers: this book does not make use of the concept of the *phoneme* in discussing spoken English, although it is a fundamental part of the study of phonology in linguistics. Many students do not find the theory of the phoneme easy to grasp at first, and in the brief introductory survey of aspects of spoken English in chapters 4, 5, and 6, it was thought better to establish an uncomplicated approach to pronunciation, even though it avoids some basic problems.

This should not deter teachers from introducing the concept and using the term *phoneme* if they wish, especially if they are teaching the phonology of English as part of a wider syllabus in the study of the language.

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how the formal study of language - linguistics - can be applied to written and spoken English in order to describe styles and varieties of language use precisely and accurately. The approach is **empirical**, that is, 'based or acting upon observation or experiment'.

Each text provides a distinctive sample of English in use. The descriptive commentaries show how a linguistic study can help to identify those features of a text which make it distinctive. The studies are not primarily concerned with evaluating the texts, to say whether they are good or bad of their kind, but will form a sound basis for critical discrimination where this is appropriate.

Chapter 1 looks at people's beliefs about, and attitudes to, good or correct English. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 discuss how English has changed in time over 1,000 years and more, and how it now varies according to geographical region and social class. Chapter 5 examines the differences between spoken and written English - that is, variations in the medium which we use to communicate with other people in the English language. Chapter 6 gives examples of the successive varieties of children's speech before they use, more or less, the English of their parents and other adults.

Finally, chapters 7, 8 and 9 present some familiar varieties of spoken and written English which are associated with specific functions, 'the language of . . .'. Styles of speech or writing change to suit the occasion, the people addressed, and the topic under discussion. Studying the examples of style in English should help you to be much more aware of how you adopt an appropriate one.

In order to demonstrate this methodical approach to the description of style in sufficient detail, the number of topics has had to be restricted. There are many more varieties of English than those discussed in this book, but a similar process of analysis and description to that demonstrated here can be used on any other variety.

How to use the book

The chapters are subdivided into topics, and give exercises which should be discussed and worked before going on to examine the descriptive commentaries which follow. The commentaries are sometimes detailed, and are intended to teach important basic concepts about the language.

Some topics include further texts and exercises without commentary, but in the restricted space of a single textbook it is not possible to include many texts for additional study. Teachers and lecturers will be able to provide their own follow-up work.

It is not essential to follow the order of the chapters consecutively. Some teachers may prefer to select or to begin, for example, with chapter 5 on spoken and written English, rather than with chapter 1 on attitudes to good English.

The linguistic features which are described arise in an *ad hoc* way from the nature and style of each individual text. The book does not, therefore, cover all aspects of the sound and sentence patterns of English, since some may not appear in the selected texts. Others, on the other hand, occur more than once. When the linguistic features are identified, they are related to the meaning and function of the texts. It is hoped that teachers and lecturers will find the texts useful for other topics in English teaching which are either not mentioned in the commentaries, or only referred to in passing.

Teachers must decide for themselves how to relate this study of varieties of English to the necessary understanding of the phonology and grammar of the language which makes it possible. Theory and practice may be taught concurrently, with the teacher using the texts to demonstrate in greater detail those aspects of the sound or sentence structure that arise from them. Alternatively, the texts may be studied after an introduction to the phonology and grammar of English has begun.

In chapters 4 and 6 especially, students will need help from their teachers in learning to transcribe the sounds of speech and to distinguish the features of dialectal accent and children's language. The exercises provided are minimal, and limitations of space make it impossible to provide a more detailed, step-by-step approach to transcription. Chapter 4 is not in itself a complete introduction to the sound patterns of English, and presupposes additional teaching.

It is certain that only a limited understanding will be possible if the texts are studied without some model of language and its appropriate

terminology being available to the student. The terminology used in this book is largely traditional and well established. Only those terms which are necessary for a satisfactory analysis or description are introduced. The accompanying cassette tape is essential for a proper study of the transcription of spoken English.

Contents

Contents of the cassette tape

1

Variety, change, and the idea of correct English

1.1 Good English

> You are reminded of the necessity for good English and orderly presentation in your answers.

This sentence appears on the front page of all the question papers of an A-level examining board. It presumes that you know what good English is, and that you could choose not to use it. The same word *good* is applied to spoken English also. The following description of a man wanted by the police appeared in a provincial newspaper:

> He wore a tattered brown trilby, grey shabby trousers, crepe-soled shoes and a dark coloured anorak. He carried a walking stick and spoke with a good accent, the police say.

Exercise

(a) Discuss what you think the examining board means by 'good English'.
(b) The 'good accent' doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the description of the wanted man. Why is this? What would a reader of the newspaper understand by it, and how would he or she recognise it?

How useful is it to divide English into two kinds, good and bad? Our use of English varies according to a number of factors, and has to be appropriate to the occasion, the audience, and the topic. In speaking or writing English, we have to make choices from:

(i) our **vocabulary**, or store of **words** (sometimes called **lexis**, so that we are said to make **lexical choices**);
(ii) **grammar**, that is, the form that words take (word-structure or **morphology**), and how words are ordered into **sentences** (sometimes called **syntax**);
(iii) **pronunciation** in speech.

We have practically no choice in **spelling** in writing, because there is a conventional spelling recorded in dictionaries for every English word, without regard to variations in pronunciation.

The variety of English which people usually have in mind when they talk about good English is called **Standard English**, and is discussed in chapter 2. It has been accepted as the variety of written English against which other varieties are assessed. Some people speak Standard English as their normal dialect, and it is the variety you expect to hear on radio and television news, for example, and which you are expected to speak in school. You may hear people refer to Standard English when they are talking about a certain kind of pronunciation, but it is better to use the term **Received Pronunciation (RP)** for this, and to distinguish pronunciation from the vocabulary and grammar of dialects and varieties. (This is explained in chapter 4.)

1.2 A Letter to the Editor

The following text introduces you to a point of view towards English and its use which is typical of men and women who know what good English is. All newspapers publish letters to the editor, written by readers who have something they want to say and would like to see in print. Sometimes a letter will start off a series of other letters in reply, and public debate then takes place. The subject may be a serious contemporary political or social topic, or a not so serious comment on something that has caught the reader's fancy.

One subject has always been good for a lot of heated argument - the English language and how it is written or spoken. The letter to *The Times* which is printed below began a series in which twenty-one other letters in reply were printed, some supporting and some attacking the original by J. R. Colville (now Sir John Colville).

Exercise 1

Read the letter and make your own response to what it says, either agreeing or disagreeing. Examine the argument carefully. Do this before you go on to read the detailed commentary which follows.

The Times

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Correct English

From Mr J. R. Colville

Sir, I hope you will lead a crusade, before it is too late, to stop what Professor Henry Higgins calls 'the cold blooded murder of the English tongue'.

It is not merely a question of pronunciation, which is to some extent regional and which changes with every generation, painful though it be to hear BBC speakers describe things as formídable, compárable, laméntable, or even, the other day, memórable. Contróversy and primárily are particularly vile. However, the Professor's and my main objection is to the mushroom growth of transatlantic grammatical errors and, in particular, to the misuse of transitive verbs.

It would be a pleasure to meet you and, no doubt, profitable to consult you on a number of matters. On the other hand to meet with you, or to consult with you, would be distasteful to us. The newspapers, including *The Times*, are increasingly guilty of these enormities, and on June 12 a formal motion in the House of Commons about Maplin descended to the depth of demanding that there should be a 'duty to consult *with* certain statutory bodies'.

Professor Higgins and I also deprecate the infiltration of German constructions into our language. This is doubtless due to too literal translation of German into English by the early inhabitants of Illinois. 'Hopefully it is going to be a fine day' translates back well into German; but it is lámentable English.

Amongst the other adverbial aberrations threatening us, the Professor and I, who were brought up to believe that short words of Anglo-Saxon origin are (except when obscene) preferable to long words of Latin origin, strongly object to the substitution of 'presently' (which used to mean 'soon') for 'now'.

All this, Sir, is but the tip of a large German-American iceberg which, we fear, will presently become uncontrollable.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

J. R. COLVILLE

Notes

Professor Henry Higgins is a character in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, which was adapted as the musical *My Fair Lady*. He is a professor of phonetics.

Maplin refers to a place which was the subject of an enquiry into the siting of another airport for London.

Commentary

First, identify accurately what Sir John objects to in other people's English usage.

(i) Pronunciation

He finds the placing of **primary stress** on the second syllable of four-syllable words painful - that is, he doesn't like to hear:

for**mid**able	com**par**able	la**men**table
me**mor**able	con**tro**versy	pri**ma**rily

You can infer that stress on the first syllable is his own choice, as he later writes *lámentable*.

formidable	**com**parable	**la**mentable
memorable	**con**troversy	**pri**marily

Try saying them aloud and decide which patterns of stress you usually use. Do different pronunciations cause confusion or loss of meaning?

(ii) 'Transatlantic grammatical errors'

That is, features of English grammar which are thought to be typical of American usage.

(a) 'the misuse of transitive verbs': **Verbs** (V) are **transitive** when they are followed by a **direct object** (DO):

V DO

It would be a pleasure to meet you.

V DO

It would be profitable to consult you

Sir John finds distasteful the form *meet with you* and *consult with you*.

Meet with and *consult with* are two examples only from a very large number of **verb + particle** constructions which, especially in informal spoken English, have been used for centuries, and which are still growing in number. Many new forms do come from across the Atlantic, and the term *Americanism* tends to be used against many other things and ideas that originate over there, and which people dislike or distrust.

Such new combinations of common, ordinary verbs and adverbs often supply new meanings. Try discussing with others what *to consult with* means. Is it different from *to consult*? If so, is it a useful distinction and therefore good English?

A look into the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that the form *meet with* is recorded at least as early as 1275, and so has a good pedigree. The verb *consult with* appeared by 1548.

(b) 'the infiltration of German constructions': Sir John's case is that the German immigrants to the USA who settled in Illinois have introduced a German construction into English by translating word for word from a German sentence beginning *Hoffentlich. . ., Hopefully. . .*

This use of *hopefully* is similar to our use of a large set of words which are a type of **sentence adverbial** called **disjuncts**. They function like compressed sentences, and express the speaker's attitude to what he or she is saying:

Naturally I'll take you to the station.
Obviously she can't come.
Possibly he'll make it tomorrow.
Basically it's a matter of prejudice.
Inevitably they take a lot of persuading.