Shopen and Williams

Standards and Dialects in English

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Introduction

The Aim of this Book and Its Companion Volume

STANDARDS AND DIALECTS IN ENGLISH has a companion volume, STYLE AND VARIABLES IN ENGLISH. Together they provide an introduction to the English language, especially American English, as part of the culture of those who speak it. Both books are about linguistic variation—this one about the kind that distinguishes communities and social groups from each other, its companion volume about the kind that occurs in the same community and even in the words of a single person. We have provided copious illustrative material, including the cassette that comes with this book, the expression of a variety of English speakers. We hope readers will find themselves involved in the exploration and analysis of this data, and then discover how they might continue with research of their own.

Diversity and Unity

Languages are forever changing, largely because new generations renew them in creative ways. By their structure, languages tend toward certain kinds of change, but at the same time, new generations contribute innovations of their own. In this way, at least until the advent of mass media and rapid transportation, the speech varieties of separate communities have usually become more distinct from each other. That is how the dialects of the single language we call Proto-Indo-European changed over five millennia to become a far-flung family of languages now spoken by half the population of the earth, a family that includes English, Icelandic, Gaelic, Spanish, Russian, Lithuanian, Greek, Albanian, Armenian, Persian, Kurdish, Hindi, Bengali and the language of the gypsies, Romany.

At the same time, people who want to communicate with each other always find means of doing so, and this is a counter-force for linguistic unity. Human beings learn to understand each other's lan-

guages or dialects; they borrow from each other and modify their standards in the direction of greater homogeneity; they become actively bilingual or bidialectal; they settle on a common lingua franca. Diversity and unity: each tendency checks the other—and complements the other. Indeed, human societies not only accommodate them both, but need them both.

Standards are conventions for how things are to be done, a defining characteristic of any culture. Shared language standards make communication possible, and they provide a framework for creativity, creativity that can have meaning for more than just the author. There are, however, different kinds of language standards—some flexible on points of grammar with emphasis instead on clarity and liveliness, appropriateness to social context and relevance to topic; others are inflexibly set on just matters of form. Problems arise when the standards reinforce social hierarchies and rivalries and exclude parts of the population from equal opportunity in an already competitive society.

Through accidents of our history, English has become the first language of most—but by no means all—of the population of the United States, and through other accidents of our history some varieties of English have come to carry more prestige than others. A child who learns one of these improves his or her chances for success in education, social mobility and employment; a child who does not can be disadvantaged. But there can be no *general* solution to social inequality in terms of language, in spite of a familiar chain of reasoning that goes: "The language of most poor people is different from that of most affluent people; therefore, it can be seen that the poor are being held back by their language, and if their language could be made like that of affluent people, they would have a better chance." This argument turns the matter on its head. Poverty is a function of the economy, not of language. However much they might want a higher standard of living, most people find identity in the way they speak and do not want to try to sound like someone else, like someone above them on the social ladder. And even if one could change the language of a substantial part of the population, members of opposing social groups would still identify each other through speech. This follows from the nature of language and society: it always has been and always will be the case that distinct social groups develop distinct ways of speaking, and that when they have reason to they notice the differences.

Everyone has a unique way of speaking, as we know from our ability to identify individuals by hearing them talk, but with close acquaintances we tend to overlook the differences. Speakers from the same place or the same social group usually display the distinct variety of a language we call a dialect, but not all dialects attract notice or comment. Which ones people notice depends on attitudes. Tolerance

for linguistic variation is a sign of social cohesion, intolerance a sign of competitiveness or even hostility. Some closely knit communities have wide variation in a language, or even more than one language, while other populations divide into antagonistic factions that use relatively small linguistic differences to tell friend from foe.

Language, more than any other kind of behavior, distinguishes humans from other animals; perhaps this is why one of the most common ways in which we belittle each other is in terms of language. The word *barbarian* from ancient Greek *barbaros* was a pejorative name for "foreigner," someone rude and uncivilized. The original reference, though, was to that person's language. It was a mocking imitation of someone who did not speak Greek, whose speech was heard as unintelligible gibberish, as a stammering *bar-bar-bar-bar*. . . . The old Slavs called the Germans *nēmci,* from the adjective *nēm,* "mute." The word meant "mute ones, ones without language." Some of us have the same motive when we accuse others of being sloppy when they say *dem* instead of *them,* or lazy when they say *workin* instead of *working,* or stupid when they say *I* ***didn't*** *see* ***nobody*** instead of *I* ***didn't*** *see anybody.* Both Spanish *Yo* ***no*** *vi a* ***nadie*** and Russian *Ya* ***ne*** *videl* ***nikogo*** translate literally as "I did not see nobody."

Any form of English which is grammatically consistent, clear, and appropriate to a speaker's topic and audience is "Good English," something we need as much of as we can get. Indeed, in our schools, we should include instruction not just in what we call good "institutional" English—the kind that serves government, business, scholarship and the professions. We should also recognize the fact that good English includes a great diversity of forms and styles, and learn to appreciate good speakers and writers wherever they come from and whatever their grammar. We have to learn the value for each of us of being able to express ourselves in a wide range of forms and styles: some appropriate for institutional settings, to be sure, but others as well.

It is true that every society with a rich written tradition eventually develops something it calls a "standard written dialect," which in fact can influence speech as well as writing. We have such a standard—it is our "institutional English"—and we cannot responsibly ignore it when we teach young people to read and write. We should give everyone who wants to the linguistic means to move up the economic and social ladder, and for that one *must* learn "institutional English."

But if our culture then decides that this "institutional English" is the *only* good English, not only does it punish those of us who speak different kinds of good English, it also deprives us of a valuable resource and the capacity to enjoy our cultural diversity. Every dialect

reflects the vitality of its speakers: every dialect is a treasury of sounds and words and grammatical forms that allow its speakers to identify themselves and their values. But every dialect is also a treasury of sounds and forms from which other dialects borrow to strengthen their own linguistic resources. We more often borrow words than forms, but to disparage any distinctive feature of a dialect—social or geographical—is to disparage and thereby reject the values and accomplishments of the speakers who use those forms. And by rejecting those values along with the speech that expresses them, we may be rejecting that which can enrich us.

We need have no fear of dialect variation wearing away at our ability to communicate with each other. Relatively homogeneous grammatical standards evolve among those who share a social life, especially one that requires public and thus formal styles of expression. With such widespread communication today in the English-speaking world, this kind of homogenization will very likely increase. But it will happen naturally, and at the same time, smaller groups of people will continue to identify with the special qualities that make their speech distinctive.

Some societies value homogeneity. In many ways we in the United States have rejected it for diversity. There may be some who find social homogeneity appealing and would like to have us the same from coast to coast. But the vast majority of us delight in and take strength from the cultural differences between New Orleans and Chicago, between Appalachia and the Cascades, between New England and New Mexico. Without giving up our institutional standards, we can take the same kind of pleasure in our linguistic diversity. In unity there is strength, but only the kind that allows diversity. Behind our social diversity is a common set of values that we like to believe gives the individual the right to be what he or she wants to be. Behind our acceptance of a relatively unified institutional standard, we can preserve a dedication to linguistic diversity.

The Chapters

The first three chapters of the book study ways in which people have molded standards for English.

Shirley Brice Heath explores in Chapter 1 the changing attitudes toward the language that have come out of American experience, showing that in the early years of the republic there was a widespread belief that a living language was a tool bound to change with the needs of its speakers. Therefore one should expect variation from one part of

the country to another and learn English by observing the usage of good speakers and writers in realistic settings. Then she shows how in the mid-nineteenth century educators began to say that good English was fixed in a form that could not be acquired through natural usage, but only through persistent study of a canonized set of do's and don'ts. She shows that the latter view came to hold sway for a century but that now both views have currency and can be seen in competition with each other.

Margaret Shaklee in Chapter 2 examines the evolution of a standard for English in medieval England. She begins at the time of England's emergence from French domination when there was increased social mobility and competition for status by people who spoke different varieties of English. She shows that between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries the standard in London came to include a number of forms that earlier were restricted to a northern dialect and investigates the economic and social background for this development. She then explores social class dialects in the late fifteenth century and attempts by grammarians soon after that time to codify a standard of correctness.

In Chapter 3, Wayne O'Neil tells how the English spelling system came to be what it is today. He surveys the necessary qualities of a good spelling system and shows how in the time of Old English the spelling was not well conceived for use by native speakers, probably because of the influence of non-native speakers, Irish- and Latin-speaking missionaries. He then traces how some time later, as literacy spread, native speakers took over the spelling system and fashioned it into a more useful implement, one better suited to the nature of the language. He shows the virtues of English spelling in respect to variation, first variation within the sound system, as for the verb *create* in the series *create, creation, creature,* and second variation across dialects where the specific sounds will vary but where the systematic relationships in a series such as *create, creation, creature* will remain the same.

The next two chapters, 4 and 5, are about the innovative way children acquire language skills. They show that children approximate the standards of the adult community only by a many-staged process of recreation, deviating from adult standards not by random "mistakes," but by systematic generalizations of their own.

Timothy Shopen describes in Chapter 4 the English of his son Pablo, especially during the first two years of his life. He recounts innovations by the child in word meanings and discusses the similarity with innovations that have taken place in the history of the language, showing that it is above all the widening of generalizations that characterizes the child's inventions. Then he explores pronunciation and

shows again that it is primarily widening that distinguishes the child's generalizations from the adults'. In an afterword, the author gives an example of historical change in English pronunciation for comparison with the child data.

Charles Read in Chapter 5 presents evidence that children's acquisition of English spelling has its own systematic development. He shows particular nonstandard spellings which could not have been learned from adults and which a number of kindergarten and first grade children produce independently of each other. He demonstrates that the children have done some untutored phonological analysis, grouping a wide range of sounds into a system that can be represented by the letters of the alphabet. He explores the principles the children have invented both for the sound system and for its representation in spelling and points to facts that imply that they perceive the sound structure of English differently from adults.

The last three chapters, 6, 7, and 8, are accompanied by a cassette. Each of them explores in some detail a dialect of American English. It is important to hear speakers of the dialects being discussed, because far beyond any other aspect of speech it is the phonetic detail, the accent of a speaker, that can gain notice and identify the person as an insider or an outsider—"one of us," or "one of them."

Timothy Shopen presents in Chapter 6 excerpts from a tape-recorded study by Bengt Loman focusing on four young Black speakers aged 10 and 11 in Washington, D.C. Attention is devoted to the range of speaking styles exemplified on the tape, and we hear how the children speak differently when talking with adults than with each other. Readers are led to explore their own speech, and if they are "standard" speakers they are likely to discover that when they speak informally they share a number of the "nonstandard" features of pronunciation exemplified by these children. What then makes the speech varieties distinctive are differences in degree rather than in kind, and one is prompted to ask whether the dialects might not be less different than they sometimes appear. In other instances the speech of the children is seen to encode grammatical principles that are categorically "nonstandard," but with their own logic and coherence.

Geoffrey Nunberg in Chapter 7 presents a study of the speech of the New York City upper class. After a discussion of the social setting of this class, he involves the reader-listener in an exploration of socially distinctive features of their speech. He shows ways in which upper class speakers resemble working class speakers in New York City, leaving the middle class speaker as the odd one out. On the other hand, he shows subtle speech characteristics that upper class speakers use to make exclusive identification of their fellows. He leads us to

investigate changes that have taken place in the upper class standard by comparing speakers of different ages and shows us similarities to upper class speech in other communities along the Eastern seaboard.

The final chapter, 8, comes under the section heading "Dialect Encounters Standard." Here Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian investigate the special problems facing a nonstandard speaker taking a standardized test on abilities involving language skills. They take the point of view of a speaker of Appalachian English and acquaint us with the standard for that dialect. We learn a method for evaluating tests in respect to the population being tested, taking the features of their dialect into account to judge the fairness of individual test items. In an afterword, Joseph M. Williams comments on the historical accidents that have put Appalachian English in the position of a nonstandard dialect.

The Sounds of English

In this book we use symbols for the sounds of English which include the following. For consonant phonemes see Table 1.

Pairs of sounds appearing together in this table contrast just for voicing. For example, the place and manner of [f] and [v] are identical, but the vocal cords vibrate for [v] and not for [f]. Readers can feel and hear the difference by saying a prolonged [fffffffff], then [vvvvvvvvv], while touching their Adam's apple.

Not present in this table is the phoneme [h], a chameleon-like sound that takes the shape of whatever sound follows it and gives its voiceless counterpart, thus a voiceless [ī] in *heat* [hīyt], a voiceless [æ] in *hat* [hæt], and a voiceless [w] in *which* when it is pronounced [hwič]. We use some additional symbols at several points, but explain as we present them.

It might be well to single out some of the consonant symbols for exemplification. See Table 2.

These are symbols for *sounds*, and the correspondence to spelling is not one-to-one. Thus, although the letter *y* is not used, the sound [y] occurs in the word *cute*, and it is this sound that distinguishes *cute* from *coot*, [kyūwt] vs. [kūwt]. The sound [š] is represented by *sh* in *shoe*, but *ti* in *nation*, *ssi* in *mission*, *si* in *compulsion*, *se* in *nausea*, *sci* in *conscience*, *shi* in *fashion*, *ci* in *special*, *ce* in *ocean*, *ch* in *machine* and *Chicago*, *sch* in *Schlitz* and *Schweizer*, and when it combines in the sequence [kš] there is *x* in *luxury* and *si* in *anxious*!

Table 1. ***The consonant phonemes of English, except [h]***

Manner of Articulation	*Bilabial*	*Labio-dental*	*Inter-dental*	*Alveolar*	*Palato-alveolar*	*Palatal*	*Velar*
	Place of Articulation						
Stops	p b			t d			k g
Affricates					č ǰ		
Fricatives		f v	θ ð	s z	š ž		
Nasals	m			n			ŋ
Central Approximants	(w)			r		y	w
Lateral Approximant				l			

And these sounds are phonemes, distinctive sound units that produce contrasts in meaning. Their phonetic realization varies from one speaker to another and from one utterance to another. Some of this variation can be predicted from linguistic context. Just substituting [l] for [r] produces a different meaning both in *fear* and *feel* and in *reef* and *leaf*. The same phoneme [l] contrasts with [r] in each pair but its physical realization is different. An [l] at the beginning of a syllable in English is always 'clear,' and at the end always 'dark.' An [l] at the beginning of a syllable is formed with just the tip of the tongue raised to make contact at the top of the mouth; an [l] at the end of a syllable has the back of the tongue involved as well, humped up to 'color' the

Table 2. ***Some of the consonant phonemes exemplified***

Symbols	*Examples*	*Symbols*	*Examples*
θ	*th*ink	č	*ch*urch
ð	*th*en	ǰ	*j*udge
š	*sh*oe	y	*y*ou
ž	garag*e*	ŋ	si*ng*

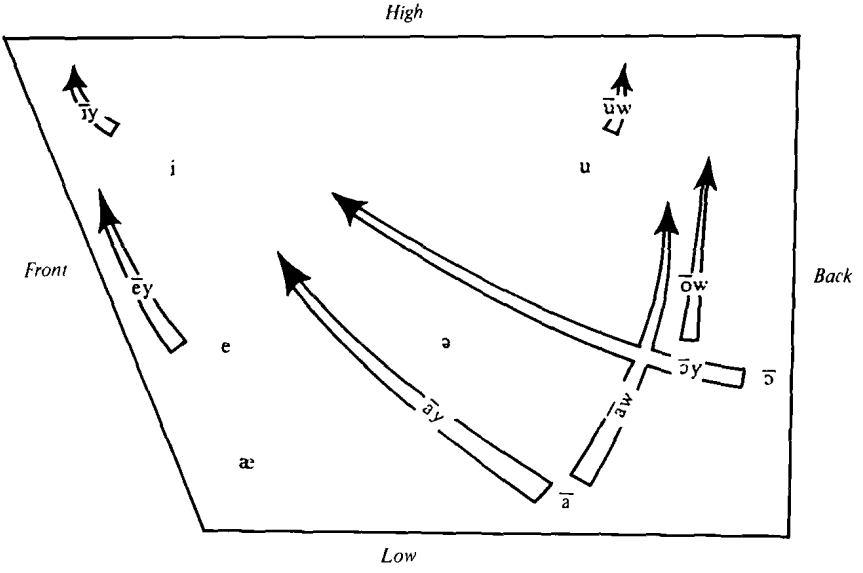

Figure 1. ***The vowel phonemes of American English in their approximate articulatory and acoustic positions.***

Tense vowels have a bar over them, lax vowels do not. Vowel sounds including one of the semi-vowels [y] *and* [w] *are glided as shown by the arrows. For many speakers of American English the glides for the high vowels* [ɪ̄y] *and* [ʊ̄w] *are minimal; for others they are more noticeable. The orientation of the vowel symbols and arrows refers to acoustic correlates for the gesture made by the tongue in the mouth, especially the position of the highest point of the tongue. Thus for* [ɪ̄y] *the highest point on the tongue is as high and as far forward as it ever gets for a vowel sound, for* [ɑ̄] *as low as it ever gets. Some speakers have additional vowel contrasts. Many speakers lack one or more of the contrasts here. For example, before* [r] *speakers may merge tense and lax vowels into a single lax pronunciation:* they [ðēy] *combines with* are *to give* they're [ðer] *with a lax vowel, sounding exactly as* there [ðer]. *Many speakers have neutralized the contrast between* [ɔ̄] *and* [ɑ̄] *in all positions, saying* cot *and* caught, hock *and* hawk *all with* [ɑ̄].

sound. If you record *feel* on tape and then play the tape backwards you will hear a peculiar-sounding *leaf* with a dark [l] at the wrong end of the syllable. You can hear these sounds distinctly in *holy* and *wholly*. *Ho-ly* has a clear [l] at the beginning of its second syllable, *whol-ly* has a dark [l] at the end of its first syllable. The two [l] sounds are *allophones*

Table 3. *The tense and lax vowels of English, in closed and open syllables*

	Vowel Sound	*In Closed Syllables*	*In Open Syllables*
Tense	īy	beet	bee
	ēy	bait	bay
	ā	pot	spa
	āy	bite	buy
	āw	bout	now
	ūw	boot	new
	ōw	boat	no
	ɔ̄	bought	saw
	ɔ̄y	void	boy
Lax	i	bit	
	e	bet	
	æ	bat	
	ə	but	
	u	put	

of the same phoneme in that although there is a difference in what the tongue does to articulate them, they are similar sounds and they do not contrast. One cannot substitute one for another in the same position and produce a change in meaning. Some languages have several [l] phonemes, English has just one.

For vowel phonemes we use the system of transcription shown in Figure 1, one suited particularly for American English. The phonetic norms specified there are reference points in terms of which we can describe variation. Speakers always have most of the 'contrasts' of this system, whatever their phonetic norms.

The vowel sounds written with two symbols are all glided: the major syllabic thrust comes at the beginning of the sound and then tapers off as the tongue glides up to a higher position. We have represented a common pronunciation where all glided vowels are tensed, with tenseness indicated by a bar over a vowel symbol, but there is considerable variation here as with other aspects of pronunciation. There is a pronunciation widespread in Canada, where the sound [āy] is tense in words like *why, wide,* and *wives,* but not tense and therefore shorter in duration in words like *white* and *wife,* where the syllable ends with a voiceless consonant.

All vowels with a bar are tense. Vowels that are not tense are called lax. A consistent difference between tense and lax vowels is that the tense vowels are longer in duration. Thus tense [ā] is notably longer in *rod* than the lax [e] in *red.* Only tense vowels can occur in stressed final open syllables (open syllables have no consonant after the vowel). Examples are shown in Table 3.

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