Writing in Nonstandard English

Edited by
Irma Taavitsainen
Gunnel Melchers
Päivi Pahta

WRITING IN NONSTANDARD ENGLISH

Edited by

IRMA TAAVITSAINEN
University of Helsinki

GUNNEL MELCHERS
University of Stockholm

PÄIVI PAHTA
University of Helsinki

Preface

Nonstandard English is defined in various ways in the articles presented in this book, most often as deviation from the standardised norm of the language. In conceiving the idea of collecting contributions around this theme, we were aware of its interdisciplinary potential, and hence we sent out invitations to scholars representing various disciplines and traditions, such as literary theory, philology, linguistics, and ethnology to meet at a Symposium on "Writing in Nonstandard English" (Espoo, Hanasaari, September 1996). The Symposium brought together a group of international scholars to present papers and discuss topics connected with the various dimensions of nonstandard language. The harvest turned out to be richer and more varied in methodology and perspective (including definitions of the key terms "standard" and "nonstandard") than we had anticipated. The yield also made us realise how timely our theme was, with the unprecedented success and impact of writers producing work in nonstandard, regional varieties of English, such as Roddy Doyle and Irvine Welsh, with the rising importance of African American Vernacular (Ebonics) literature, and with the recent attempts to provide schoolteachers with guidance in the form of grammars of regional, nonstandard, "real" English. This volume presents a selection of articles based on and developed from the papers read at the Symposium. Some contributions have been specially solicited for this book.

We are grateful to NorFA for providing funds which allowed us to organise the Symposium, and to the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences for a grant for the technical editing of this volume. We are also indebted to the English Departments at the Universities of Helsinki and Stockholm for their support. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of the volume for insightful suggestions and constructive criticism, and John Benjamins Publishing Co. for including the volume in Pragmatics & Beyond New Series. Our special thanks go to Salla Lähdesmäki, Martti Mäkinen and Hanna Puurula, who provided editorial assistance with great skill, accuracy and good humour.

The Editors

Contents

Writing in Nonstandard English: Introduction

Irma Taavitsainen and Gunnel Melchers

University of Helsinki and University of Stockholm

"Standard English" is a widely used term that resists easy definition and seems to change identity according to the approach at hand. Yet it is used as if people knew precisely what it refers to, and some even consider its meaning self-evident, i.e. it is both the usage and the ideal of good or educated users of English (cf. Chambers 1995). For some it is a monolith, with more or less strict rules and conventions, for others it is a range of overlapping varieties (McArthur 1992). By contrast, nonstandard is never monolithic.

The definition of "standard" is difficult (see below), and in a similar way its opposite "nonstandard" changes identity depending on the point of view and the period in question. The present volume shows the multidimensional nature of nonstandard English with different definitions and approaches.[1] The perspective this book takes is that of viewing linguistic variation as a complex continuum of language use from standard to nonstandard, with both terms understood in a broad sense, covering several dimensions from one pole to the other.

In this introduction we hope to clarify the links between the various contributions and to explore the dimensions of variation they offer. Both literary and nonliterary texts are dealt with: the focus of analysis is often on written representations of spoken language and the salient features of social or regional dialects, but the aims of the writers and the interpretations by the readers may be different. A variety of approaches in mainstream linguistics, sociolinguistics and dialectology are explored here: quantitative studies based on corpora, pragmatic analyses looking at situational contexts, and qualitative assessments of involvement and ideology. To a varying degree, representa-

tions of all levels of language and its use are highlighted: phonetics and phonology, spelling, morphology, lexis, syntax, discourse, genre and even register. The articles approach the issues from different angles, but are thematically or methodologically linked so that they form a coherent whole, suggesting to us the first steps towards a general theory of writing in nonstandard language.

1. Standard versus nonstandard language

The general aim of this introduction is to provide a background to the varied premises, theories, levels of language, and types of data represented in this volume. We start by looking at definitions and views of standard versus nonstandard language, and then survey the ongoing debate in educational policies and the treatment of the issue in various linguistic sub-disciplines and in literary studies. It goes without saying that we cannot possibly offer a complete and definitive account; virtually every publication on the English language contains at least some reference to standard English.

1.1. *The elusiveness of definitions*

It would appear that a definition of "nonstandard" could only be established through a notion of "standard", its opposite pole. The term "standard", however, although widely used by laymen as well as professional linguists and generally associated with the Establishment, codification, prescription, overt prestige and stability, is difficult to pinpoint. In fact, the very orthography of the term "standard English" is problematic: should it be "standard English" or "Standard English"? According to McArthur (1992: 982), the distinction between the two-capital form and the one-capital one has to do with viewing the concept as more or less institutional. In *A Social History of English*, Leith (1983: 32–33) describes standard as a model worth imitating, with maximal variety in function and minimal variation in form (as originally formulated by Haugen 1966, cf. also Sandved 1981: 31). He emphasizes that the growth of standard varieties involves an element of engineering, i.e. a conscious, deliberate attempt to cultivate a variety, as well as a desire to have it recorded and regularised, to eliminate variation and, if possible, change (for a similar definition, cf. Romaine 1994: 15).

Trudgill, who throughout his work has been concerned with definitions of these central terms, gives a widely accepted and frequently quoted definition:

> *Standard English.* The *dialect* of English which is normally used in writing, is spoken by educated native-speakers, and is taught to non-native speakers studying the language. There is no single *accent* associated with this dialect, but the lexicon and grammar of the dialect have been subject to *codification* in numerous dictionaries and grammars of the English language. Standard English is a *polycentric standard* variety, with English, Scottish, American, Australian and other standard varieties differing somewhat from one another. All other dialects can be referred to collectively as *nonstandard English.* (Trudgill 1992: 70–71)

It is symptomatic that more recently Trudgill has chosen to come to grips with the concept of standard English through establishing "what is isn't" (cf. Trudgill 1998: 35–39; 1999: 117–128). He has selected five main points to illustrate his view:

1. It is not a language, but one variety of English among many. It may be regarded as the most important variety of English for the reasons given in the definition above.
2. It is not an accent, as it has nothing to do with pronunciation. This statement maintains the usual distinction between "dialect" and "accent", which proves important for his conclusion.
3. It is not a style, as it may vary in degree of formality. This means that slang, swear words and other informal words can be used in it; e.g. *The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip* represents standard English, whereas *Father were very tired after his lengthy journey*, owing to its nonstandard verb form, does not.
4. It is not a register, though it is employed in registers like scientific English by social convention. It is equally possible to use a local nonstandard dialect in nearly all social situations and for nearly all purposes, as is done in many other communities.
5. It is not a set of prescriptive rules, as given by prescriptive grammarians over the last few centuries. Standard English may well include, for example, prepositions at the end of sentences and constructions such as *He is taller than me*.

After establishing these five negative definitions, Trudgill, elaborating on (1), states in accordance with his previous view that "standard English is a dialect" and "a sub-variety of English". Unlike other dialects, however, it is not part of a continuum, since the standardisation process results in a situation

where, in most cases, a feature is either standard or it is not. This point is, however, arguable, as judgements vary and tend to be subjective and only extreme cases are obvious (see below). A further characteristic is that it is a purely social dialect, whereas other dialects tend to be simultaneously social and geographical.

There is some disagreement with regard to Trudgill's views on standard English. In particular, his claim that it is a social class dialect has been seen as controversial (cf. Stein and Quirk 1995). It is also worth noting that Trudgill was not the first linguist to define standard English by stating what it is not. In 1981, Peter Strevens listed four rather different negative definitions: (1) it is not an arbitrary description of a form of English devised by reference to e.g. literary merit or linguistic purity; hence it cannot be described as the best English or literary English; (2) it is not defined by reference to the usage of any particular group of English-users, and especially not by reference to social class; (3) it is not statistically the most frequently occurring form of English; (4) it is not imposed upon those who use it. It is true that its use by an individual may be largely the result of a long process of education; but standard English is neither the product of linguistic planning or philosophy, nor is it a closely defined norm whose use and maintenance is monitored by some quasi-official body (Strevens 1981, quoted from McArthur 1992: 983). With the exception of the social-class issue, Strevens' views do not necessarily conflict with Trudgill's highlights; rather, they can be explained by his somewhat different profile as a linguist, based on his work in applied linguistics and second language acquisition.

Negative definitions are elusive and leave a great deal undefined. According to this discussion, nonstandard seems to encompass all other dialects of English except the standard. This provides a useful starting-point for our attempts at clarifying the concept, which has acquired a wealth of definitions and implications.

1.2. *Educational policies*

During the last ten years, the teaching of English, especially English grammar, has been almost continuously and often hotly debated in Britain. The debate has not only taken place in educational institutions; views have been voiced by politicians, journalists, novelists (e.g. Kingsley Amis and Anthony Burgess), right-wing groupings, including peers of the realm, and Prince Charles,

"whose remarks in praise of grammar confirmed its new status at the centre of a national crusade" (Cameron 1995: 78). Here the concept of a standard language is associated with prescriptive attitudes towards language use, and is concerned with inherent value judgements and a normative approach, in contrast to a descriptive approach aiming to provide realistic facts about language, including broad linguistic variation (Crystal 1997: 2–3).

It would appear that the school is at the core of most attitudes to standard versus nonstandard English, which is reflected in the concerns of linguists but is particularly obvious in views embraced by the general public, including politicians. In her autobiography Mrs. Thatcher, for example, actually gives a definition of standard English, which is said to be "the language you learn by heart". Her definition is interesting in that it highlights the fact that standard English is particularly associated with the written language. In fact, it can be said that the grammar of spoken language is stigmatised (cf. Carter 1997). Since most of us have a tendency to see our own education as superior, there is also the danger of not allowing for language change: what was once learnt "by heart" tends to stick; this is well documented in collections of letters to newspaper editors, complaining about the degeneration of the language (cf. e.g. Aitchison 1991: 4–5). Even definitions can arouse heated feelings as the outrage caused by the 1996 Reith lectures by Jean Aitchison shows: her definitions were seen as a "desecration" and "defilement" of the English language. In fact, Aitchison talks about "so-called Standard English" (1997: 56) and points out that the word "standard" is ambiguous: it can mean either a value which has to be met, or it can mean uniform practice; these two meanings have long been confused.[2]

One account of this debate and the educational programmes that are related to it is given in the controversial book *Language is Power: The Story of Standard English and its Enemies* (Honey 1997). The first lines of this book, which is above all a massive attack on prominent sociolinguists such as Jenny Cheshire, William Labov, James and Lesley Milroy, Suzanne Romaine and Peter Trudgill, run as follows:

> This book is all about standard English and the educational and political controversies which have arisen about it in recent years. By standard English I mean the language in which this book is written, which is essentially the same form of English used in books and newspapers all over the world. (Honey 1997: 1)

After a brief presentation of English as a world language and a rather tradi-

tional account of regional variation, the author makes an attempt to define standard English in positive terms: the first characteristic is its generality, the second its relative uniformity, and the third the fact that standard English is subject to normative regulation according to standards of correctness. These are, for the most part, recorded in dictionaries and embodied in a set of rules taught in schools both to children whose native language is English and to those for whom it is as a foreign language (Honey 1997: 3). The book gives an elaborate and detailed expression of generally embraced, conservative views on the importance of standard English and grammar in education, symptomatically ending with compliments to Prince Charles (Honey 1997: 169–204).[3]

Considering the focus of the present volume, it could be added that the crusaders and their enemies do not differ markedly when it comes to the actual definition of what constitutes "Standard English"; rather, the conflict has to do with definitions of evaluative concepts. There are, however, differences in the opinions concerning the historical background and the standardisation process. What also emerges, at least between the lines, is a difference in the perception of nonstandard English and its potential. Not surprisingly, the term is not found in Honey's index at all.

With regard to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), the definition of standard English is seen as a crucial issue. In most cases, the main problem is the choice between the two main standard varieties. This is how they are defined in the widely used textbook *International English* (Trudgill and Hannah 1994: 1–2):

> ... that variety of English often referred to as 'British English'. As far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned, this generally means Standard English as it is normally written and spoken by educated speakers in England and, with minor differences, in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, The Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.
>
> The other form of Standard English that is widely taught to students of EFL (...) we shall refer to as North American English (...), meaning English as it is written and spoken by educated speakers in the United States of America and Canada.

It is well known that school curricula in most EFL countries have been quite rigid in their preferences for one or the other standard variety. There is, however, a tendency to accept both the standard varieties as models and requirements, although most educational authorities, including university departments of English, still insist on "the consistency rule". Trudgill and

Hannah, on the other hand, argue convincingly for a more relaxed view, pointing out that a mixture is a perfectly natural phenomenon. Since mixture will characterise a native speaker after exposure to another variety of English, why demand more consistency from a Dutch or Swedish student of English?

Intriguingly, the subtitle of *International English* is *A guide to varieties of Standard English*, which, in addition to "West Indian Standard English" turn out to include English-based creoles and certain second-language varieties. A wide concept of "standard" is also suggested in McArthur's famous "circle of World Englishes" (cf. e.g. McArthur 1998: 97), whose core is labelled "World Standard English". In a similar model Görlach (1990), on the other hand, prefers to call it "International English", not explicitly presented as standard (cf. McArthur 1998: 98, 101). The scope of "standard" language may be problematic: if defined so broadly, what is left at the opposite end, to be defined as nonstandard? Does it exist, or must it be defined by other criteria?

1.3. *The process of standardisation: a synchronic view*

The ideology of standardisation is a contradictory issue (cf. J. Milroy 1993, Cameron 1995), as the ongoing debate shows. It would seem that standard versus nonstandard language use is one of the chief concerns in this field. It is worth noting, however, that many major textbooks in sociolinguistics, such as *Sociolinguistic Theory* (Chambers 1995), do not appear to be concerned with the definitions of standard and nonstandard at all, and when definitions are given, they vary.

The educational questions discussed above lead directly into sociolinguistic core issues. It is claimed that sociolinguistics can offer a principled and socially sensitive account of the diversity found in varieties of English and demonstrate the wide range of language variation in Britain along regional and social continua. The question of what sort of English to teach to foreign learners is discussed by Lesley Milroy in "Sociolinguistics and second language learning: understanding speakers from different speech communities" in a collection of articles called *Language and Understanding* (eds Brown et al. 1994). Here she introduces another way of looking at the issue:

> ... language is inherently variable, and variant choices carry clear social meanings. If we want to consider seriously and dispassionately the nature of Standard English, the real question is not *what* it is (which is unanswerable), but *how successful is the standardization process* in different mediums

> (speech and writing) and at different linguistic levels. ... Standardization is a
> tendency towards uniformity which is socially very highly valued, but in fact
> never totally successful... (L. Milroy 1994: 167)

Instead of trying to define the notion of standard English, her question shifts the focus on the standardisation process, which is seen at work both in speech and writing. The different levels of language are all concerned, from pronunciation to syntax and lexis, and even register has to be taken into account.

This view represents standard English in a new light. Interestingly, in their general introduction to the volume, the editors note that she is the only contributor who confronts the issues raised in trying to determine what standard English is; most of the papers take it for granted and see no need to discuss it (Brown et al. 1994: 2). This is the synchronic angle to the process of standardisation; in a diachronic perspective it is one of the main foci of investigation.

1.4. *The process of standardisation: a diachronic view*

The role of education is emphasised in historical approaches to the standard language as well; "standard" has been defined e.g. as the use of a set of established rules that signals competence, achieved by education (Smith 1996: 65). A standard variety of language is said to have undergone standardisation and acquired autonomy. Standardisation is the process by which a particular variety of a language is subject to language determination, codification and stabilisation (Trudgill 1992; see also Stein 1994: 2–4 and Romaine 1994: 84). As an outcome, the lexicon and grammar are codified in dictionaries and grammars. A distinction between "dialect" and "standard language" has also been made along these lines: dialects, it is claimed, are characteristically spoken and do not, like languages, exist in a written form. To some extent, at least, languages do indeed tend to have a codified, written form, laid down in dictionaries and grammars and propagated at all levels of education. As a result of the standardising process, a standard variety acquires social status and prestige, serving as a model for various functions and transcending the usual dialect boundaries (Wales 1989).

The nonstandard side is fairly easy to place in this scheme, as it is the standardisation process that leads from the nonstandard state of greater variation towards uniformity of use. The rise of the national standard in the fifteenth century exemplifies this process, in avoiding some of the extremes of

Northern and Southern forms and acting as both a unifying and a levelling force. The suppression of spelling variants has traditionally been a central topic of standardisation studies, especially in the spread of Chancery English in the fifteenth century, but other levels of language have gained more prominence lately.

The belief that language should ideally be used in a consistent or uniform manner, thus suppressing optional variability, is seen in statements like "those who aspire to use standard English cannot be content to alternate, as their ancestors did and as many non-standard users still do, between *lie* and *lay*, *himself* and *hisself*, *I saw her* and *I seen her*... They need to be told which of these possibilities is 'correct'" (Cameron 1995: 38–39). Cameron talks about "residual variation" and claims that it is far more widespread than most discussions of standard English would allow, and that much of what we call style actually refers to this residual variation. In corpus studies the changing ratios of variants may indicate standardisation processes, and the focus is often on this residual variation.

The key question of diachronic studies is language change. The ultimate aim of historical linguistics is to explain the causation of language change, and its origin, the actuation problem, is one of the core issues (J. Milroy 1992: 20). According to the variationist view there are competing variants in use at any given time: some of them may be archaic or regionally restricted, and some may belong to the upper register only; some increase and widen their distributions while others may be receding (for the variationist view, see Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968, Romaine 1982, and J. Milroy 1992). Computerised corpora make the study of variation in large linguistic materials possible, and thus we gain new knowledge about the changing ratios and can base our conclusions on solid empirical data. Besides residual variation, the dichotomy between standard and nonstandard is connected with the core issue of actuation, as speakers initiate changes. The role of nonstandard as speech-based is relevant in this connection as most changes come from below, and nonstandard speech in writing, or genres that are nearest to the spoken mode, may be the first to record innovations.[4]

1.5. *Dialectology*

The grand old man and trendsetter in English traditional dialectology, Joseph Wright, begins his preface to the monumental *English Dialect Dictionary*

(1898) by pondering upon the principles of inclusion: purely dialectal words do not pose a problem, but those that occur both in literary language and dialects do. Obviously, the word "nonstandard" did not exist in Wright's time, but it is noteworthy that he does not refer to "standard" either; he uses "literary language" instead. He concludes that words that merely differ in pronunciation are not included, but those that show some local peculiarity at the semantic level are.

This is how Wright accounts for his principles in distinguishing dialects from literary language; there is no indication of his method, which suggests that its main component was introspection:[5]

> ... it is sometimes found extremely difficult to ascertain the exact pronunciation and the various shades of meanings, especially of words which occur both in the literary language and in the dialects. And in this case it is not always easy to decide what is dialect and what is literary English: there is no sharp line of demarcation; the one overlaps the other. In words of this kind I have carefully considered each case separately, and if I have erred at all, it has been on the side of inclusion. (Wright 1898: v)

After Wright, the major contribution to English traditional dialectology this century has been the *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED*). Harold Orton, one of its initiators and its driving force does not deal with the standard English versus dialect distinction at length in his introduction to the survey, but seems to view standard English as a vernacular at one extreme of a continuum, while at the other end we have the oldest forms of regional dialect (cf. Orton 1962). Despite its overall aim of rescuing the oldest forms of dialect, the material strikingly demonstrates the impact of standard English. Recently, various aspects of this impact have been highlighted, exclusively drawing from data from *SED*: Upton (1995) on phonological mixing and fudging, Boye (1997) on the dialect of the Isle of Man, and Melchers (1997) on the bleaching of proverbial similes.

Admittedly, and to Orton's credit as a scholar, he was clearly aware of the complex character of much of his data of regional English:

> Anyone with direct knowledge of current English vernacular will know that dialect speakers are quite inconsistent in their pronunciation. So strong is the pressure of the standard language upon them, so willing are they to accept variant forms, and so ready are they to modify their own pronunciation in conversation not only with strangers but also with people outside their own intimate circle that their spoken words often occur in three or four different forms. (Orton 1962: 18–19)

With reference to widely circulated textbooks on dialectology, Wakelin (1977: 4), whose book draws largely on *SED* data, defines standard English as the most important of all present-day English class dialects, a view which takes into account the need for standard English when communicating beyond the family, close friends and acquaintances. In making this point, he is in fact quoting Quirk, who, however, puts it more strongly: "Standard English is 'normal' English... basically an ideal, a mode of expression that we seek when communicating beyond..." (1962: 100). Before the publication of Wakelin's book, the set textbook at departments of English used to be Brook's *English Dialects* (1963). Interestingly, Brook's view on standard English is basically the same as Trudgill's; he does not seem to be concerned with defining it, but simply takes it for granted. He emphasises that even standard English is a dialect, but with a special status. He also appeals for more equanimity manifest in an anecdote about a London schoolmaster: when asked whether the evacuation of his pupils to the country during the Second World War had had much effect on their speech, he replied: "Not particularly. They went away saying 'We was' and they came back saying 'Us be'" (Brook 1963: 26).

A more complicated view is found in a recent textbook by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) on American dialects and dialectology, destined to be the major one for a considerable time. The concept of "standard" is elaborated by a distinction between formal and informal levels. Their view of formal standard English, or prescriptive standard English, does not deviate from the above described views: it tends to be based on the written language of established writers and is codified in English grammar texts. Its conservative nature is emphasised as changes take place within the spoken language first. The definition of informal standard English is more interesting from our point of view. It is much more difficult to define this concept than formal standard English. The authors remark that "a realistic definition will have to take into account the actual kinds of assessment that members of American society make as they judge other speakers' standardness", and continue:

> As a starting point, we must acknowledge that this notion exists on a continuum, with speakers ranging along the continuum between the standard and nonstandard poles. ... Ratings of standardness not only exist on a continuum; they can be fairly subjective as well. ... At the same time that we admit a subjective dimension to the notion of standardness, we find that there is a consensus in rating speakers at the more extreme ranges of the continuum. (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998: 10–11)