

## The Changing World of Standard English

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Let me start by saying that I am writing from a British point of view. This in no way implies that I think British English is best: I just happen to live there at the moment. I would also like to say that I am not a sociolinguist, but simply an informed observer, textbook writer and teacher trainer. My concern is with non-native speakers of English and the maze of language which they are exposed to when they are in contact with native speakers, many of whom do not speak and write as the books say they do.

One issue which comes up time and again in the UK is the question of Standard English. Most native speakers could give you some sort of answer if you asked them to define Standard English; textbook writers assume that there is some sort of Standard English; and foreign learners of English usually hope to learn what most of us would think of as a Standard English.

Three years ago I moved back to live in England after having lived abroad for many years, which means that I am now surrounded by native speakers of English every day, which is a bit of a luxury for an EFL teacher. In the course of my work I mark the written work of non-native students of English on a regular basis. However, far from finding that being in the UK has made me more certain about what is acceptable and unacceptable in language terms, I find that the opposite is true. Words do not mean what they used to mean; native speakers make *mistakes* all the time, people use words I have never heard before, and worst of all, my colleagues at the University of Newcastle, my fellow native speakers, do not always agree when I ask them for help.

Recently I gave this year's students a diagnostic language test on which they did not do particularly well. I expect them to do considerably better on the same test at the end of the year, but I am well aware of the fact that British students doing an equivalent course at the same university would not score any higher than my students. In a recent survey of post-graduate students, one science student was quoted as saying, "I could definitely do with a refresher course on the basics of grammar covering such things as the differences between *their* and *there*" (Dewsbury 1994, 4-6). Now my students would know that!

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Does this mean that I expect more of foreign students than I would of native speaker students? I suspect it does. Richard Hudson in his book, *Teaching Grammar*, defines grammar as, "[The study of] a language, in the sense of a body of facts (i. e., rules) that native speakers know about their language.... The bare minimum of grammar, on which everyone agrees, consists of (a) morphology, (b) syntax" (Hudson 1992, 224). So where are these native speakers who know their grammar and on whom the foreign learner can rely?

Alan Davies looks at the question of the native speaker in some detail in his book, *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics*, and ends up defining a native speaker as someone who is not a non-native speaker. It seems that even if he feels that the idea of native speakerness is a myth, it is "a useful myth" (Taken from a review of Davies 1991 by George Kersham 1994).

So is the existence of a Standard English also a myth? In the UK we do not have a rigid system similar to that in France, where individuals recently narrowly escaped having to conform to a law which, according to an article in *The Observer*:

would have banned foreign terms from the French vocabulary and offenders would have faced fines for using foreign words.

But the highest constitutional body in Paris yesterday stepped back from the linguistic brink and solemnly declared that the French can go on enjoying *le picnic*, *le sandwich*, *le jogging* and even *le cheeseburger*. (*The Observer*, 31 July 1994)

However, there is no avoiding the fact that Standard English is somehow associated with standards. In the UK the Standard English debate has been fired by the National Curriculum requirements. The report from the Kingman Committee on the teaching of English in schools states that "...one of the school's duties is to enable children to acquire Standard English, which is their *right* [my italics] (Kingman Committee 1998, 2.31).

Everyone seems to have an opinion about Standard English, about falling standards, about the plethora of new words which abound in English, about whether change in the language is a good thing or a bad thing. No less a person than Prince Charles had this to say on the matter:

We've got to produce people who can write proper English. All the people I have in my office, they can't speak English properly, they can't write English properly.... If we want people who write good English and write plays for the future, it cannot be done with the present system and all the nonsense academics come up with (28 June, 1989, quoted in Carter 1993)

The National Curriculum does not aim to produce playwrights, but it does define what is meant by Standard English in the curriculum:

Standard English is distinguished from other forms of English by its vocabulary and by rules and conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation which pupils should learn to follow.

Spoken Standard English is not the same as Received Pronunciation and can be expressed in a variety of accents.

(English in the National Curriculum Draft Proposals, May 1994, 1)

The last part of this definition has been the subject of debate in many sectors of society, and the status of accents is still by no means clear. In his inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Nottingham in December 1992, Professor Ronald Carter, Professor of Modern English Language there, drew attention to an interesting linguistic phenomenon made use of in television advertisements:

...the accents used to overlay many current television and radio advertisements betray some fundamental British social attitudes towards accent variation. Thus, standard accents (known as RP or received pronunciation) are used to sell banking and insurance policies, "lean cuisine" ready meals, expensive liqueurs and exotic holidays; regional accents are used particularly to market cider and beers, holidays in inclement British coastal resorts and wholesome foods.... (Carter 1993, 7)

This subject is in itself a fascinating one with all sorts of sociolinguistic implications, but here it is a question of terminology: RP is assumed to be "standard accents." Moving back to the students I teach, many of them have children who go to school in Newcastle for a year and end up speaking with a Newcastle accent, which is certainly not RP. When these children go back to Norway, they sometimes find themselves in the situation where their English accent is acceptable in England, but not in Norway.

I come back to the question of acceptability and change in the language. Quoting again from Professor Carter's lecture:

...language is subject to constant change. It is dynamic, not static. New words evolve for new contexts. Words always move into semantic spaces left vacant or created by shifts in ideology and in cultural practices. (Carter 1993, 4)

The focus of language change is often directed towards the world of words, and, as Katherine Whitehorn, writing in *The Observer* says: "the changing nature of words brings out more protests than an eight-lane motorway" (*The Ob-*

server, 7 August, 1994) Robert Allan, editor of the new Chambers dictionary is quoted in *The Independent* newspaper as saying:

I always resist pressure to champion "pure language", the sort of thing the Queen's English Society stands for. It's an illusion. "Standard English" is what is acceptable to people in power. It is socio-political, not a linguistic thing. (*The Independent*, 10 September 1994).

The debate about language change is endless. Many years ago I read Professor Jean Aitchison's book, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*, now in its 2nd edition, and was fascinated by the parallel she draws in the book between the changes in human language and the changes in the song which humpback whales sing every year. All humpback whales apparently sing the same song during the mating season every year, but it is a different song every year. It has been found that the song which the whales sing at the beginning of each breeding season is the same as the one which they sang at the end of the previous breeding season. As the breeding season progresses, the whales change the tune gradually, thus "constantly changing their communication system" in a way similar to the way in which humans change their communication system. (Aitchison 1991, 210-211)

The image of the humpback whales is a gentle one; one that for me conjures up the feeling of a gentle flow of gradual change, but recently the changes in English I have experienced have left me feeling a little bewildered at times, more as if a herd of elephants had wandered through my living room.

Take the sentence, "I was gobsmacked by shrimping dweebs". If one of my students had said this, I would have said that I didn't understand the sentence although I do understand the word "gobsmacked".

"Gobsmacked by Shrimping dweebs: appears as a headline in *The Independent* newspaper on 10 September this year and led into an article on the new words that have entered the English language. (Anyone who wants to find out what the sentence means can look the words up in *Chambers' Encyclopedic Dictionary*.) In 1993 the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* included 4,000 new words. *The Longman Register of New Words*, published in 1989 had over 1200 new words and meanings; volume two came out only one year later in 1990 with over 1000 new words. These include words like *to handbag*, "to attack or destroy as if by hitting with a handbag" an activity which seems to be associated almost exclusively with Margaret Thatcher. Mr Allen apparently regrets not putting it in the *Chambers'* dictionary referred to above.

Many words which eventually find their way into dictionaries are words which have been said on television or on the radio or have appeared in the newspapers. Some do not make it into the dictionaries. In an interview in *The Inde-*

*pendent* newspaper, Alan Clarke, a former MP and author of the bestseller about the Thatcher years, *Diaries*, talks about his regrets on being out of active politics:

I am riddled, or is it raddled, by quasidisreputable episodes and you could say I'm actively disqualified, but I know different. (*The Independent*, 28 June, 1994)

I can see no reason why *riddle* should have an irregular past tense, but you never know these days, and does it really matter?

This takes me into the area of grammar, and what is acceptable or not acceptable. I find myself talking to the radio or to the television saying to these reliable native speakers who supposedly all have a grammar which everyone agrees on, "Please don't say that. It will confuse my students." I am not talking about the schoolgirl who said that when she was appearing on television she was nervous because she had "to remember to talk proper, and to use *were* and *was* in the right places." Nor am I talking about slips, which are perfectly natural in spoken language. I mean sentences like, "Colleagues have seen him yesterday," which was said and repeated by the BBC correspondent for the Vatican last month when reporting on the health of the Pope. Or sentences like, "No other members of the royal family was there," which was said on the BBC television news recently.

There is also the much reported sentence from Neil Kinnock, former leader of the Labour Party: "She could give a better answer than that to I and to my honourable friends," which was said during Primer Minister's Question Time on 14 April, 1998. (For a discussion of the language issues raised by this sentence, see *Why did he say it?* by David Crystal in *English Today*.)

Who decides whether these sentences are acceptable or not? Certainly not the BBC, although many people consider the BBC to be the upholders of British English. Talking about pronunciation, for example, Graham Pointon, writing in *English Today* points out that:

we [the BBC] try to judge our amendments to coincide with, or follow, developments in the country as a whole. I hope that we never initiate changes, nor find ourselves in the vanguard. (Pointon 1998, 41)

The BBC state categorically that they only reflect the state of the art as far as language in general is concerned. So is it the great British public who decide what is acceptable or unacceptable? Marks and Spencer, a large British High Street store, used to have a notice at certain check-out points in their food departments which said, "Less than 5 items". It was pointed out by a member of the public that this was grammatically incorrect. The notice now says, "Fewer than 5 items."

Unfortunately, as teachers of English as a foreign language, we do not have to hand the expertise of the writers of the National Curriculum, the weight of the BBC or the vigilance of the great British public. As teachers of English as a foreign language in a world of constantly changing language, we are the ones who have to decide if the language of our students is acceptable English or not.

Out of interest you might like to look at the following sentences and try to decide if they are acceptable or unacceptable.

Japan wants to shout the Australian a beer.

This is a non-smoking guest house.

Show me an alligator and I'll show you somebody truckin' hard the other way.

The 19.40 train from Leeds approaches platform 2 now.

I'm sorry, I'm not understanding you.

Please present your ticket at the attended window.

The University offers several careers including engineering and business administration.

These is definitely bats in the bushes.

Americans graze more than the British.

This piece of music allows him to show his pianistic talents to the full.

Two of the sentences were written by non-native speakers. The others were said or written by native speakers of English from the US, Australia or the UK. I have yet to find a group of native speakers who agree on the acceptability or otherwise of all the sentences, so perhaps we can call them semiacceptable, which is a useful word in this changing world of Standard English, even if I cannot find it in my dictionary.

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