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THE CONSTRUCT OF “STANDARD ENGLISH”

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Abstract

This paper deals with the notion of Standard English as a sociolinguistic subject of interest, a field of study that has been elaborated in great detail starting from the latter half of the previous century leading into current day, one in which many linguistic perspectives and approaches have changed as a result of changes in the overall dominant ideology in its immediate social context. The aim is to provide a brief overview of some of the main issues that concern standardization, the misconceptions pertaining to language ‘standards’, the historical background that disambiguates the conditions that brought upon the standard ideology and the frameworks built to comprehensively illustrate the process that leads to standardization.

Key words: language, variety, standardization, standard, dialect, process, history.

Introduction

Standard English (or SE for short) is familiar to many laypeople and scholars alike. It is the primary language variety that many speakers of English first encounter in the sphere of institutionalized education (regardless of native or learner status) and as such, its authority is taken as granted without further questioning over any other varieties of English. In fact, this is the variety being utilized for the very purposes of writing this paper.

Even its status as a ‘language’ or better yet, ‘dialect’, is doubtful at most, since it does not seem to have a clearly defined boundary between the two (that can only be ‘decided’ on basis of institutional authority); a dichotomy debated at length amongst those involved in the sociolinguistic domain, and at current, unable to be clearly defined due to lack of consensus from sociolinguistic research carried out thus far (despite many notable linguistic works being based on the study of languages considered as standards). Still, Haugen (1997) attempts to define a language, and how it differs from a dialect. He considers (standard) language to be “a superposed norm used by speakers whose first and ordinary

language may be different. A 'language' is the medium of communication between speakers of different dialects” (p.344). He also considers language to have a wider range of functions; thus, it enjoys a status of prestige over dialects on the same territory.

The growing influence of Chomsky’s theory and the conceptualization of language acquisition as an innate human capacity challenged the behaviorist perspective and consequently weakened the view of second-language learning as a process of developing new linguistic habits. Moreover, empirical evidence demonstrated that children learning a second language produced errors even in areas where the structures and rules of their first and second languages did not differ. Such errors could not be adequately predicted or explained within the framework of contrastive analysis, thereby revealing the limitations of the model in accounting for the developmental and creative nature of second-language acquisition (Jovanovska, 2025).

This paper ventures into uncovering the process of language standardization, the history behind how it came to be established as a superposed variety of English, what are the sociopolitical, economic, cultural and ideological factors that led to it being viewed as a ‘symbol’ of national identity and gaining such ‘prestige’ over other varieties in the first place, and what this means for the present and future of the English language and the status of the many internal varieties it contains.

Issues and Misconceptions

First and foremost it is of utmost importance to mention that no language variety is either inherently (in)correct in nature, more ‘advanced’ or ‘primitive’, nor ‘good’, ‘bad’ or even (im)pure and (un)corrupted in any sense; every language and the way its structured is (ideally) supposed to adequately serve the communicative and expressive needs of all its native (and nonnative) speakers. These oversimplified false dichotomies only serve to further segregate groups of speakers and superimpose one variety at the expense of another (or many others). Language is not a socially isolated phenomenon and can and is known to experience minor or major changes due to either inter-variety or, on a larger scale – interlanguage influence, and by its very nature, change ought not to be always perceived in a negative light (as a threat to language stability).

The notion of Standard English being uniform, stable and invariant (in both form and function) across time, space, or context, is idealistic at best and does not reflect reality of usage in the slightest; the most power it holds is formal prescription to which not every person is strictly beholden to, especially not in speech (whose structure is notoriously difficult to pin down due to its many intricacies); since normally, standardized language varieties are upheld much more readily in the

medium of writing (particularly in official texts), where a person who is considered highly educated (which comes with its own assumptions about social class) is expected to pay careful attention to every aspect of linguistic form and function and how they interact stylistically within the discourse.

Unfortunately, that will not deter many from (subjectively) denouncing whole distinct language varieties as incorrect or illegitimate deviations from the ‘standard’ and deem them as unequal or invalid based on some trivial differences they may not understand (or it is a case of either classist and/or ethnically motivated prejudice towards the groups that speak them), but those deliberate differences make intuitive sense and create a feeling of pride of shared group identity and solidarity to the speakers involved in their communication. This type of reasoning equates language, not as a product of the mind, but rather a cultural possession akin to religion or legal systems. Having alternate varieties with norms that are not set in stone and which reflect concurrent language changes also serve to create a resistance to imposed uniformity and threaten the long upheld status quo.

While English may possess a status of a highly valued ‘global’ language due to its colonial (and imperial) history and has imposed itself as a second tongue to many, that does not imply that it is ever truly uniform throughout any group of (non)native speakers; Mufwene (2010, in Johnstone, 2016) posits that it is “highly unlikely that a homogeneous ‘Global English’ will ever arise”. “If it does, it would be the first such evolution toward linguistic uniformity in the history of language spread and contact” (p. 2). English is in no state of lessening its hold on the global market as of current, and therefore, the repeatedly uttered false claim that it is being corrupted and in need of ‘protection’ has no ground to stand on and is only a matter of ideological perception.

Another misconception that has long been dispelled is that dialects are deviations from the standard, rather than the other way around, as the many overlapping features in dialects can make way for a creation of a norm in the standard. This line of thinking has the potential to harm those whose regional variety, language, or class ‘dialect’ are considered distant/distinct enough from, yet also similar enough to the standard (in this case, English) to potentially interfere with their education and further professional development, such as those of the AAVE speaking community and other (marginalized) minority groups across the English speaking world, meaning they are pressured to be bidialectal (or bilingual) and have a diglossic relationship to SE.

Now, just because the term ‘standard’ is used in this context, does not mean that every language is subject to the same level (degree) of rigor in standardization; SE has quite vague boundaries, and it is not imposed with such strictness as the academy-governed French, which is both more highly codified and more systematically elaborated. When a language becomes a written language, that

change is not merely institutional, it is also systemic. Additionally, not every nation's language has gone through the process of formally recognized (official) standardization or can be considered 'standard' on a set of arbitrary criteria.

According to Garvin (1993, p. 43), two measures of the degree of standardization of a language are its "flexible stability" and its "intellectualization," or its capacity to "develop increasingly more accurate and detailed means of expression".

He goes on to elaborate on both measures:

Flexible stability means that a Standard language in order to serve its functions has to be stabilized by an appropriate codification process and that the norms established by this codification have to be sufficiently flexible so as to accommodate the modifications required by the cultural changes and developments that occur in the speech community.

Intellectualization means the capacity of a language to develop increasingly more accurate and detailed means of expression, especially in the domains of modern life, that is to say in the spheres of science and technology, of government and politics, of higher education, of contemporary culture, etc. (p.43)

Furthermore, Garvin (1993), while noting on the importance of a standard language, outlines five '*functions*' of a standard (or what the language symbolizes for a community of users):

1. Unifying—serves as a unifying bond in spite of dialectal and other differences;
2. Separatist—affirms the separate identity of a speech community in the face of others;
3. Prestige—confers a certain prestige on a speech community that possesses a Standard language and on an individual that masters it;
4. Participatory—allows a speech community to use its own language in order to participate in the cultural, scientific, and other developments of the modern world;
5. Frame-of-reference—serves as a frame of reference primarily in matters of language correctness but also in other respects.

Peter Trudgill (1999) has opted to characterize Standard English by first delineating what it is **not**. He starts by stating that SE being referred to as a '*standard language*' is a misnomer for what is simply a variety of English, or more specifically, "English, like other Ausbau¹ languages, can be described as consisting of an autonomous standardized variety together with all the non-standard

¹ Ausbau (Kloss, 1967) – An Ausbau language, or 'language by development', is 'recognized as such because of having been shaped or reshaped, molded or remolded – as the case may be – in order to become a standardized tool of literary expression' (in Ayres-Bennett, 2021).

varieties which are heteronomous with respect to it” (p.118). He then goes on to say that it is not an *accent* either, since this variety is spoken with a multitude of accents (native and nonnative alike) across the world. This brings up the point of RP (Received Pronunciation) in Britain, which is a purely norm fixed accent used by the upper middle class (and by extension, in media), and whilst they also use SE in conjunction with RP, the reverse is not the case. His next remark is on the topic of *style*, and while SE is characterized by features that are commonly used in formal style, this does not necessarily mean it cannot be used with informal style as well. Lastly, SE is not a matter of *register*; many technical registers do have their own notable features that distinguish them from one another, but they are not exempt from being used in non-standard speech, which may often be the case in more local speech communities.

The question that emerges from all of this is the following – What is ‘Standard English’?

As the statements above point out, it is some sort of ‘dialect’, yet a variety with no discernible accent, style or register, one that is elevated purely on a social basis, and due to that, it is impossible to place it geographically on a dialect continuum. Trudgill (1999) also observes that SE is not a set of prescriptive rules, since it does seem to have some internal inconsistencies that have gone unaddressed, such as inability to distinguish between *do* as an auxiliary and as main verb; present tense 3rd person singular being the only one with –s ending; lack of multiple negation (negative concord); irregular formation of reflexive pronouns (as some are formed with genitive, while others from objective pronouns); lack of ‘*tu – vous*’² type of second person pronoun distinction (you is the personal pronoun used for both cases); irregular forms of *to be* across present and past tense; use of distinct preterite and past participle forms; and only having dual deixis from a speaker point of view.

Background

As with many things English, this linguistic development is tied to the tumultuous history of England and its subsequent colonies; the ‘language’ and its varieties shifted with every group migration, change in reign or policy, every armed conflict and conquest, technological innovation and every shift in economic power resulting in redefinitions of class structure (and the freedom to have upward class mobility within). Its Anglo-Saxon (Germanic) ancestry and influences are not lost on any linguists, as are vestiges leftover from French rule as well. The close contact and shared history with other northern European nations (such as Denmark) have also pressured changes and left a lasting influence on English as a language.

² T – V distinction denotes, on top of plurality, a way to convey a degree of formality or familiarity in different social contexts.

This pressure manifests itself most in the perceived opposition of the middle to lower strata against the higher class, who naturally, despite being outnumbered, bring with them the authority to influence the language of the many, especially those seeking to improve or maintain their societal status. Much of that lower class population consists of (marginalized and/or minority) groups originally situated in the rural country, meaning, as they move into the urban and trade centers, they bring with them a variety that is not indigenous to that area, which later becomes a sort of social dialect which distinguishes them from others. Such are the circumstances that led many American southerners to migrate en masse to the northern parts of the country seeking better living conditions and prosperity after the Civil War, bringing their distinct linguistic features with them and indirectly spreading them further than they would've initially, had they remained situated in the south.

United Kingdom (UK)

This kind of class mobility with the aim to seek prosperity can also aid in the recognition and establishment of a standard language. After French rule was dissolved in medieval England, some scholars perceived that the lingering (nonnative) French usage of the upper class failed to impose a standard and did not have much effect on the rest of England's varied dialectal population; it raised concerns about establishing one national language to utilize in its stead. The dialects constituting Middle Ages 'English' were geographically differentiated into three areas: northern, midland, and southern (Northumbrian, Mercian, Wessex and Kentish). The grammatical features varied across dialects with no consistent marking (opting for one over another depending on regional dialect). Innovations spread from the northern dialects downwards through contact (with different levels of adoption amongst the population). The southern heavily populated areas signified the end destination of that spread and namely, the dialects of trade centers such as London also came to be used as the unofficial national standard due to its optimal position (its proximity to the court and notable contemporary universities) and its propensity in accepting newcomers seeking opportunities coming from elsewhere on the isles, with many coming from a background status of the then emerging middle class. This shift came with elevated class consciousness, meaning many who were trying to break into the upper (middle) class had heightened awareness of which varieties were appropriate for use in formal contexts. The upper class was largely non-permeable to outside influences, and naturally, their speech was out of touch with most of the ongoing linguistic developments of the time, but it was known to have adopted lower class features for casual stylistic use.

The introduction of the printing press into English literature certainly contributed greatly when it comes to codifying English's written standard, even if it had minor inconsistencies in its early

iterations through variation in orthographical and morphological representations. With time, and as many more gained literacy and became highly educated in the art of writing literature and study of language, many language guides have cropped up, ranging from pronunciation and spelling, to syntax, to official dictionaries, all prescribing a ‘correct’ use of the language. Thing is, codifying usually follows the changes in language use, it does not precede or prescribe them; some changes in English usage were far too rapid to capture concurrently in writing.

United States of America (USA)

Across the pond, so to say, the circumstances were not too different, yet at first, the sheer variety in dialects (and languages) in the colonies were granted great respect, value and appreciation from both contemporary scholars and the regular person alike. Language variation was seen as an inevitable fact of life, since plenty of the initial immigrants came from different European countries, along with the indigenous American population whom those Europeans needed to converse and share a territory with; and while English was the language of government, having a singular national standard was not high on the priority list.

But as the young nation moved well into the nineteenth century and proceeded with the rise of technological, educational and industrial advances, coupled with the political destabilization that was caused by the Civil War and an additional wave of (non-European) immigration, and with that, the resulting shift in class mobility, more and more the tides shifted in favor of a more conservative language ideology and intolerance to variety, and as a result, prescriptive approaches in language guides became important for those whose needs were to gain or maintain status in society and appear as educated and intellectual.

A consequence of acquiring a certain level of literacy and education is also made obvious in the ‘educated’ formal style speech of those who are deep into studying the texts, as it resembles the forms of the written medium much more closely than it would for those not in that line of study; most of standard language seems to be modeled by the speech of those in close contact with the written language (such as linguists). This put educators of English in a cornered position; left only with the task of disciplining the minds of young learners into intellectual advancement and upholding the stability of the language, which by then came to be associated as symbolic of nationhood (and national loyalty). Being educated on ‘proper’ language gained a moralistic tone, with emphasis on grammatical ‘correctness’ with little to no regard for stylistic appropriateness. That being said, prolific writers of the era (as creatives) stood in opposition to the pressure of a fixed ‘standard’, as they thought it would stifle authentic literary expression.

One thing that has been left out of the discussion so far, but is very heavily implied to have been stigmatized by these historical developments is the undeniable existence of AAVE as a variety. The oppression and (continued) marginalization of African Americans in every sphere of past and contemporary American society is something that has seriously tainted the treatment aimed towards their speech varieties born out of language contact. This is a uniquely American issue based on a (rather flawed) ideology that aims to delegitimize any form of English (or even other imported languages spoken on North American soil) that is associated with being of a different ethnicity, and is an especially potent problem, as it always is enacted by virtue of and in tandem with systemic class oppression.

This type of perspective carried over well into the 20th century, solidifying its stance as the field of linguistics was gaining its footing in the academic sphere (culminating with debates over the English Only movement across many states of the US), with little to no freedom in opposing it with a more liberal approach of language variety appreciation; something that has only in recent times has been ideologically adopted as a mindset amongst linguists and language planners alike, resulting in a gain in more descriptive rather than prescriptive grammar approaches.

However, spreading that type of perspective to the non-linguist masses has taken and will take a significant amount of time; it is still a rather long way from changing people's minds and linguistic habits completely and permanently. Recent research developments have also considered de-standardization or re-standardization as a viable alternative approach to the traditional standardization approach. Some communities in some former colonial countries or minorities in standard language monolingual dominant countries have even put in the effort in reclaiming their languages and slowly transforming them into recognized national languages.

Process

On the subject of language standardization, Lesley Milroy (1999) has suggested that:

...standardization is best treated as a *process*, since attempts to locate a specific standard (product) are doomed to failure, given that all languages (except dead languages) vary and are in a constant state of change, phonology being particularly resistant to standardization. (p. 173)

One of the classic models created to describe the developmental process behind the shift from dialect all the way to language was proposed by Einar Haugen in 1966, who outlined it briefly in four distinct steps:

- (1) Selection of norm;
- (2) Codification of form;
- (3) Elaboration of function;
- (4) Acceptance by the community.

The first two refer primarily to the form, the last two to the function of language; additionally, the first and last are concerned with society and the two in the middle with language itself. His simplified model of standardization (as seen in Haugen, 1997) is illustrated below:

Table 1: Haugen's model of standardization

	Form	Function	This model has later been revised to specify the processes included within these four steps. They are not intended to be successive (they may even appear simultaneously or cyclically). The (1987) revised model is as follows (as seen in Ayres-Bennett, 2021):
Society	Selection	Acceptance	
Language	Codification	Elaboration	

Table 2: Haugen's revised model of language planning

	Form (policy planning)	Function (cultivation)
Society (status planning)	(1) <i>Selection</i> (decision procedures) (a) Identification of problem (b) Allocation of norms	(3) <i>Implementation</i> (educational spread) (a) Correction procedures (b) Evaluation
Language (corpus planning)	(2) <i>Codification</i> (standardization procedures) (a) Graphization (b) Grammatication (c) Lexication	(4) <i>Elaboration</i> (functional development) (a) Terminological modernization (b) Stylistic development

Haugen's model has been criticized for not including the role of ideology (the motivations and non-linguistic goals of the 'standardizers') in its framework, amongst other criticisms, such as whether it is exhaustive or suitable enough to be applicable to the modern social ecology without even further revision; whether it takes note on the question of agency (individual or institutional), and its lack of bottom-up perspective (role of ordinary speakers in standardization). Each of the four dimensions (implementation and acceptance are set to act as one dimension) has been further developed in Ayres-Bennett (2021), with the addition of questions that need addressing (presented in table format for sake of brevity):

Table 3: An elaboration of Haugen's model of standardization

	Form	Function
Society	<i>Selection</i>	<i>Implementation</i>
	Type of norm selected	Nature of the implementation
	Agents of selection	Agents of implementation
	Goals/outcomes of selection	Goals/outcomes of implementation
Language		<i>Acceptance</i>
		Nature of the acceptance
		Leaders and laggards
		Degree of acceptance
	<i>Codification</i>	<i>Elaboration</i>
	Type of codification	Nature of the elaboration
	Agents of codification	Agents of elaboration
	Goals/outcomes of codification	Goals/outcomes of elaboration

James and Lesley Milroy have built their model upon Haugen's, proposed more hypothetical stages in the implementation section, and maintained that codification precedes prescription and that standardization is an ideology, or 'a set of abstract norms to which usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent' (p. 36, in Ayres-Bennett, 2021). Their model is presented below:

Table 4: Milroy and Milroy's (2012) model of standardization

(1) Selection
(2) Acceptance
(3) Diffusion
Once the selected variety is well established and has defeated its competitors:
(4) Maintenance
(5) Elaboration of function → more value for purely utilitarian ends
(6) Acquisition of prestige → associated with the most successful people
(7) Codification
(8) Prescription

Hornberger (2006, in Ayres-Bennett, 2021) with help from her contemporaries, has attempted to synthesize many of the existing contemporary standardization models into one integrated framework for language standardization with varying degrees of success in match up, as the terms don't fully overlap conceptually or have differing values assigned to them. The two main axes represent widely accepted conceptual distinctions, namely language policy and planning (LPP) types and LPP approaches.

Her framework has six dimensions of language planning (and while she does not mention the role of ideology, it is implied).

Table 5: Hornberger's integrative framework of language standardization

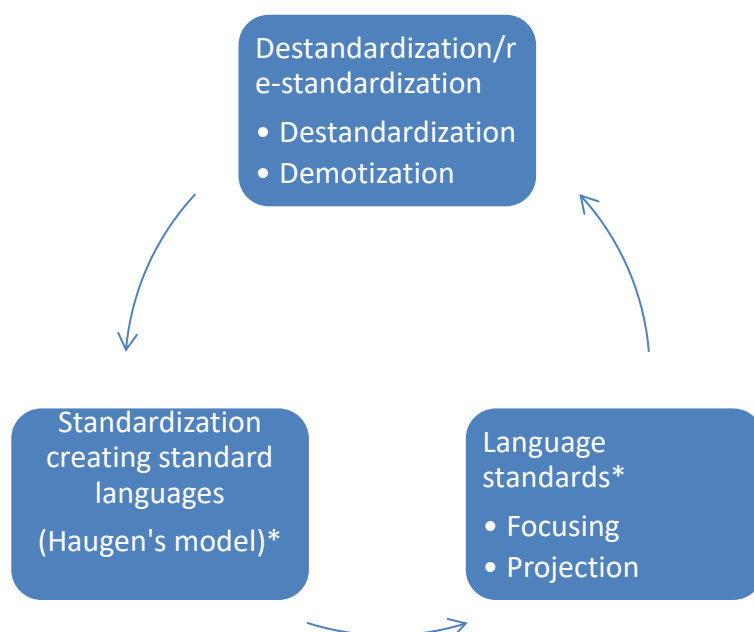
Types	<i>Policy planning approach (on form)</i>	<i>Cultivation planning approach (on function)</i>
Status planning (about uses of language)	Officialization Nationalization Standardization of status Proscription	Revival Maintenance Spread Interlingual communication – international, intranational
Acquisition planning (about users of language)	Group Education/school Literary Religious Mass media Work	Reacquisition Maintenance Shift Foreign language/second language/literacy
	<u>Selection</u> Language's formal role in society <i>Extra-linguistic aims</i>	<u>Implementation</u> Language's functional role in society <i>Extra-linguistic aims</i>
Corpus planning (about language)	Standardization of corpus Standardization of Auxiliary code Graphization	Modernization (new functions) Lexical Stylistic Renovation (new forms, old functions) Purification Reform Stylistic simplification Terminology unification
	<u>Codification</u> Language's form <i>Linguistic aims</i>	<u>Elaboration</u> Language's functions <i>Semi-linguistic aims</i>

More recent work has both innovated and continued the work of previous linguists, shifting from ‘standard language’ to ‘language standard’, changing the ideological approach from top-down (standardization from above) to bottom-up (from below), many of them valuing minority languages the same as the dominant, and moving past the Eurocentric bias to apply their knowledge and models to many of the other languages in the world, many of which do not fully or even partially correspond to the previous categorizations of standardization or are special cases (such as colonial imports like English, French or Dutch being used as the official language in some regions of the world).

Coupland and Kristiansen (2011) distinguish between two different processes that have appeared from the rise in anti-authoritarian, individualistic and democratic ideology in modern times:

- *Destandardization*: a possible development whereby the established standard language loses its position as the one and only ‘best language’. Democratization can lead to ‘value levelling’ that will secure access to public space for a wider range of speech varieties – this would be equal to a radical weakening and eventual abandonment of the ‘standard ideology’ itself.
- *Demotization*: the ‘standard ideology’ as such stays intact while the valorization of ways of speaking changes – the belief that there is, or should be, a ‘best language’ is not abandoned, but the idea of what this ‘best language’ is, or sounds like, changes. Demotization is revalorization, an ideological upgrading, of ‘low-status’ language to ‘best language’ status.

So far, all of the above notions can be neatly summarized in figure form as a cycle; since they signify a circular movement from having one standard, to dismantling it, to possessing multiple (pluricentric restandardization).



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Figure 1: Schematic model of the standardization cycle (as seen in Ayres-Bennett, 2021)

Conclusion

The issue of standardization is convoluted, demanding, the understanding of which varies even amongst those who actively participate in its study; it is informed by factors that lie far beyond the purely linguistic sphere, and because of that, it needs to be treated with grace in discussion and debate in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. It brings up the question of whether standardization as a process can be used for the ‘common good’ and can contribute to the preserving of language diversity on a large scale (and broaden the horizon beyond its Eurocentric perspectives). And while there is no clear answer to that question just yet, research is already on its way to attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of previous work and innovate in ways yet to be seen when it comes to building even more thorough standardization frameworks and offering fresh perspectives and different approaches as they pertain to both standard and nonstandard languages.

As seen above, tracing the developments that make up a ‘standard’ language’s historical background can be a vital factor for regarding its legitimacy status, but that is not the only

¹ “Linguistic activity is a process of **projecting** onto others images of the universe as we perceive it, and by implication inviting others to share our symbolization. ... If we feel that those we are speaking to are part of a group we wish to identify with, we may modify our behavior so as to be more like our percept of theirs. In that case, the behavior of the group will become more **focused**, and since our symbolization centers on the characteristics with which we have endowed groups which we imagine we perceive in society, our own behavior too will then in that particular respect become more *focused*, more *regular*”. (Le Page, 1988, in Ayres-Bennett, 2021)

condition for acquiring legitimacy (many communities have legitimate yet nonstandard languages or their languages are considered less/more standardized on that spectrum). On the other hand, the conditions that can foster language endangerment and language death are also those that foster language revival and the creation of new sets of linguistic resources for new needs and in new contexts.

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