

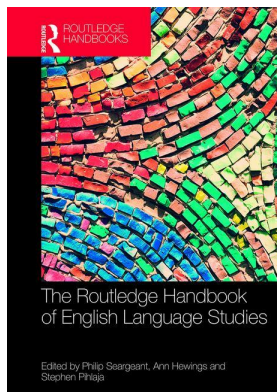
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Standards in English

Lionel Wee

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the notion of standards in English by beginning with the questions ‘What is Standard English?’ and ‘Why does it matter?’ Taken together, these two questions cover the critical issues and topics that pertain to discussions about standards in English.

Regarding the first question, I briefly review a number of answers that have been proposed, including assertions that Standard English is the variety spoken by educated speakers, that there are multiple (national) Standard Englishes, and that it might even be possible to envisage a World Standard Spoken English. Regarding the second question, I try to make clear the ideological links between Standard English and the neoliberal emphasis on upward educational mobility and the development of human capital.

Following on from this discussion I suggest that the key dispute boils down to the issue of ontology. Here, I introduce a conceptual distinction between an ontologically naïve approach to Standard English and one that is ontologically curious. Whereas the former tends to treat Standard English as a product, the latter focuses on the social and political processes that stabilize specific language practices as indexical of a certain kind of personhood. From this it becomes clear that Standard English is one dialect among many, albeit one that has been elevated in terms of prestige and one where variation has been reduced. The role of actors in shaping, contesting and negotiating what ought to be considered relevant standards in English is thus emphasized.

I then close the chapter by offering, as an important direction for future investigation, a possible way of theorizing the issues raised from an ontologically curious perspective: the Deleuzian notion of assemblage. I explain what it might mean to treat Standard English as a linguistic assemblage, and why this might be especially relevant to the study of standards.

Current critical issues and topics

It is important to appreciate the difference between standardization as a process of trying to establish uniformity in language use, on the one hand, and the ideological notion of standards as markers of proper usage, on the other. The two are not unrelated, since already we have to

ask who decides on which linguistic conventions are to be treated as the benchmarks from which variation should be discouraged. Nevertheless, the former process has been going on for many centuries, whereas the latter can be more directly traced to the ‘history of linguistic *complaint* from the Middle Ages onward’ (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 26).

Early manifestations of such complaints came from the English printer William Caxton (1490) and the writer Jonathan Swift (1712), so that by the eighteenth century there was a strong emphasis on authoritarianism and prescriptivism (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 27–28). Milroy and Milroy (1999: 30) summarize the matter thus:

The standard ideology is promoted through public channels: in the past, standardization has first affected the writing system, and literacy has subsequently become the main influence in promoting the consciousness of the standard ideology. The norms of written and formal English have then been codified in dictionaries, grammars and handbooks of usage and inculcated by prescription through the educational system. Standardization through prescription has clearly been most successful in the written channel: in the daily conversation of ordinary speakers, however, it has been less effective. Indeed, the norms of colloquial, as against formal, English have not been codified to any extent.

Precisely because of the fact that what counts as standard is deeply ideological, it is therefore not surprising to note that there is ‘no general consensus’ as to what Standard English is (Bex and Watts 1999: 1). That being said, possibly the best place to start appreciating the contemporary controversies and, indeed, anxieties surrounding standards in English is to consider the assertion made, for example, by Honey (1997, see also the discussion in Cameron 1995) that Standard English is the variety spoken and written by educated speakers.

This is a highly controversial attempt to answer the question ‘What is Standard English?’ because it relies on a number of assumptions that appear to be problematic (see Crowley 1999). For one, since there are significant differences between the grammar of spoken and written English, characterizing both as Standard English simply evades the important question of how such differences do not undermine the claim of unity, that is, whether there is a need to distinguish between Standard Written English and Standard Spoken English. This is not a trivial issue because grammatical differences are also the kinds of things that presumably distinguish Standard English from its non-standard counterparts. This issue, if left unaddressed, means that we are left with the further and arguably even more perplexing question of how much variation (and of what kind) is tolerated before the differences in linguistic practices that distinguish Standard Written and Standard Spoken English become characterized as non-standard.

A second point is that the group, ‘educated speakers’, that Honey relies on to ground his definition of Standard English is not at all homogeneous, since there are different levels of education and, of course, different educational institutions that enjoy varying degrees of prestige and credibility. All these considerations bring up the question of just what kind of education is needed before a speaker is deemed to be a speaker of Standard English. This in turn raises the highly contentious question of who decides that a speaker has been sufficiently educated to be considered a speaker of Standard English. Simply asserting that other speakers of Standard English are the best judges will not do because of the vicious circularity involved in this line of argument. Claiming that there is an ineffable nature to Standard English that is clearly recognized even by those who may not be competent in it is equally problematic because it shifts the grounds of argument from scholarly debate to matters of taste and faith, and raises the contentious issue of who specifically ought to be the arbiters of such taste and faith. This shift needs to be avoided as far as possible because, as we will see shortly, what

counts as Standard English can significantly impact on the social and economic fortunes of individuals. The intersection between Standard English and matters of social justice is too important to be left to the tastes and faith of a (self-)selected few.

In addition to his controversial definition of Standard English, Honey (1997, quoted in Milroy and Milroy 1999: 135) also seems to subscribe to a kind of conspiracy theory, given his argument that

cognitive and rhetorical development is arrested when persons speak non-standard English, and that linguists as diverse as Noam Chomsky, Sir John Lyons, Stephen Pinker and Peter Trudgill (amongst others) have united to persuade such persons that there is no need to learn Standard English, thus keeping them in a disadvantaged position. This is not only implausible, but demonstrably false.

Thus, Honey is not only making the problematic assertion that speaking non-standard English leads to cognitive problems; he is also suggesting, rather incredibly, that there is a political attempt by ‘enemies of Standard English’ to subjugate specific segments of society by actively ensuring that they learn non-standard English.

A more reasoned and moderate position against non-standard English is offered by Quirk (1990). While generally sympathetic to the idea that non-standard English is just as linguistically legitimate as Standard English, Quirk is nonetheless concerned that the lack of institutional support for the former means that learners would be penalized socio-economically (as opposed to cognitively) if encouraged to learn non-standard English (1990: 9):

It is neither liberal, nor liberating to permit learners to settle for lower standards than the best, and it is a travesty of liberalism to tolerate low standards which will lock the least fortunate into the least rewarding careers.

Quirk is correct that even in those countries where a non-standard English might be considered indigenous and mainstream, there tends to be a sense of stigmatization attached to both the variety and its speakers. This is despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that acquisition of a non-standard variety in any way impedes the acquisition of Standard English (Siegel 1999). However, as Kachru (1991) points out, by focusing on what is institutionally accepted, Quirk is limiting his concerns to a status quo that unjustly discriminates against non-standard varieties of English and, by extension, their speakers. Moreover, Quirk’s position risks legitimizing and perpetuating the status quo rather than calling it into question. For Kachru, Quirk fails to acknowledge the vibrancy and reality of ‘invisible language planning’ (Kachru 1991: 8), where informal usage amongst non-elites in unofficial contexts (including creative works) reflects an acceptance of the growing legitimacy of non-standard varieties.

Kachru’s own response is to argue that there should be ‘*pluralistic* centers of reference for norms and standards’ (Kachru and Nelson, 1996: 84, italics in original) and as such, there is no reason to look only to traditional native speakers for directions and models. This notion of pluralistic centers is captured in his highly influential Three Circles Model (Kachru 1985, 1986). The model distinguishes between inner, outer, and expanding circles of countries, where each circle represents specific ‘types of spread, patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages’ (Kachru 1985: 12). The Inner Circle countries (e.g. the USA, the UK) are primarily places where the traditional monolingual native speakers of English are located. The Outer Circle comprises countries with a history of colonization by English-speaking countries (Singapore, Malaysia, and

India), and where the language has continued to serve various institutionalized functions. The Expanding Circle countries (e.g. South Korea, Japan, and China) are where English has no or restricted official status and is a foreign language. This means that in addition to broadly distinguished classes of varieties according to which circle they inhabit, individual varieties associated with different nation states are also distinguished, such as British English, American English, Malaysian English and Singlish.

Kachru's model has been criticized for its assumption that it is possible to identify and demarcate varieties of English, especially along national lines (e.g. Pennycook 2003: 518, 521). Bruthiaux (2003: 168) makes a similar though more general point when he suggests that the model encourages an unhealthy tendency among scholars to contribute to the proliferation of new Englishes, suggesting that this eagerness to identify distinct varieties lacks validity. Bruthiaux's criticism is well taken, since an informal and brief Internet survey will throw up references to Chinglish in China, Manglish in Malaysia, Konglish in South Korea, Japlish in Japan and Spanglish in Puerto Rico, to mention just a few putative Englishes whose status as established varieties vary widely.

The proliferation of multiple varieties of English – notwithstanding the fact that they all manifest different levels of influence from indigenous languages and enjoy different amounts of public support as to their social legitimacy – has led to anxieties that having too many dialects will undermine the value of English as a language for global communication. To this, Crystal (1997: 137) has suggested that 'a new form of English – let us think of it as "World Standard Spoken English" (WSSE) – would almost certainly arise'. According to Crystal (1997: 137–138),

People would still have their dialects for use within their own country, but when the need came to communicate with people from other countries they would slip into WSSE . . . People who attend international conferences, or who write scripts for an international audience, or who are 'talking' on the Internet have probably already felt the full of this new variety. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a word or phrase which you know is not going to be understood outside your own country, and of finding an alternative form of expression. It can also affect pronunciation and grammar. But it is too early to be definite about the way this variety will develop. WSSE is still in its infancy. Indeed, it has hardly yet been born.

It is debatable whether Crystal's assertion about the emergence of WSSE is at all justified. Almost twenty years after this assertion, it is not clear that there is any empirical evidence pointing to the existence of this 'new form of English'. Conceptually, the basis for Crystal's assertion seems to be that intelligibility is assured only when speakers use the same variety. But this line of argument ignores the fact that multilingual competence, rather than involving multiple competences in monolingual bounded systems, actually involves partial or truncated competences in multiple languages as well as the ability to combine resources from these languages so as to creatively produce hybrid constructions (Blommaert et al. 2005; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). In other words, there is no reason to assume that the only way that communication can be assured is via the use of a single variety. Canagarajah (2010: 19) has made this point in his own discussion of language, communication and community in the period prior to Western colonization:

Since South Asians live in a heterogeneous community where they expect to interact with others from different languages and cultures on a daily basis, South Asians are always

open to negotiation. Negotiation of language differences is the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, there is no expectation of a common language as the basis for these interactions. Sometimes, there is no common language available, and even to expect one would be to impose one's own language as the vehicle for communication.

This skepticism about distinct systems is further driven home in more recent work arising from investigating language use in the workplace where speakers mix resources from Japanese and English with no resulting communicative problems (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010: 241):

At the very least, then, we can note that such instances of English/Japanese mixed code use derive not so much from the use of different first and second languages but rather as the result of a mixed Japanese/English code becoming the lingua franca of the workplace.

From this brief survey, we can identify three major questions regarding standards in English:

- (i) How do we distinguish between Standard English and non-standard English? Related to this is the role of the native speaker, whose language practices and intuitions are usually held up as reliable indicators of Standard English despite the fact that invocations of native speakerhood tend to confuse linguistic expertise with racial or ethnic affiliations (Rampton 1990).
- (ii) What are the consequences for speakers of non-standard Englishes? Are they penalized in any way? Conversely, are any of the privileges that might be accorded to speakers of Standard English unfair?
- (iii) Following on from (i) and (ii) are questions that relate to redress and remedy. That is, what are the changes to language policies or general attitudes that might be needed to overcome linguistic discrimination or ensure a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities?

These questions matter because, rightly or otherwise, there are strong perceptions that speakers of non-standard Englishes will be penalized. Job interviews and various language assessments in educational situations can be quite intolerant of perceived departures from what is taken to be Standard English, even if the speech community itself is characterized by widespread variation in language practices. For example, in a discussion of Singapore, a former British colony, Milroy and Milroy (1999: 89, italics in original) point out that even though 'a very distinctive *non-British* acrolectal variety of English is gradually emerging' to the point where it can be observed 'in the speech of radio announcers, university staff and business executives', there is a strong sense of prescriptivism that is reluctant to acknowledge the changing and highly variable nature of English language usage. Thus, Milroy and Milroy (1999: 90) observe,

the educationally damaging and generally inadequate character of the prescriptions is revealed rather clearly when attempts are made to enforce them in a multilingual community like Singapore ... overprescriptivism forms an inadequate approach to reconciling the need for good standard language teaching with due recognition of speakers' existing language patterns.

And Park (2013) notes that even in the workplace, where the corporation might be committed to 'diversity management', traditionally non-native speakers such as Koreans, for example,

were characterized as having English that was good enough for routine tasks but ‘inadequate for more serious and fast-paced discussions and debates in strategic meetings’ (Park 2013: 8–9, italics added). Thus,

diversity management attributes any inequality that is experienced by such groups to their cultural essence – such as Koreans’ ‘reluctance’ to speak out their views – rather than to social conditions. It thus becomes the responsibility of the group members to overcome such essential characteristics – even though they are simultaneously trapped within those characteristics by the very discourses that define them as essential to the group. *This also explains why older discourses of identity that reify national difference do not disappear in the age of commodification of language and identity*; they serve as important resources for explaining, rationalizing, and reframing issues of inequality as something innocent, something that can be transformed into a justification for the dominant social order of the workplace.

Opting out of learning English is not a realistic option either. As Block (2010: 300) has pointed out, the English language has now been commodified as ‘a necessary skill’ and speakers who are seen as competent in the language enjoy the concomitant cultural capital of being positioned as ‘global citizens/cosmopolitan consumers’.

But the difficulty that is involved in moving away from overprescriptivism and towards greater tolerance and, indeed, appreciation of linguistic variation cannot be overestimated. Kachru (1992: 60; quoted in Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008: 205) has drawn attention to the sense of ambivalence or ‘linguistic schizophrenia’ that accompanies any decision about which variety of English to favor, whether it be a ‘new variety’ or one that has historically enjoyed comparatively greater institutional acceptance:

The non-native speakers themselves have not been able to accept what may be termed the ‘ecological validity’ of their nativised or local Englishes. One would have expected such acceptance, given the acculturation and linguistic nativisation of the new varieties. On the other hand, the non-native models of English (such as RP or General American) are not accepted without reservation. There is thus a case of linguistic schizophrenia . . .

And Cameron (1995: ix–x., italics in original) has emphasized how the whole issue of evaluating language practices can actually constitute a major preoccupation for many people:

What is clear, however, is that a great many people care deeply about linguistic matters; they do not merely speak their language, they also speak copiously and passionately *about* it . . . The linguistic questions laypeople care most about are questions of right and wrong, good and bad, ‘the use and abuse of language’. In fact, it would not be overstating the case to say that most everyday discourse on language is above all evaluative discourse.

These concerns and controversies revolving around the relationship between Standard English and non-standard varieties are nicely illustrated in the ‘Ebonics debate’ (Wheeler 1999). In December 1996, the Oakland school board in California, USA, decided to recognize Ebonics (also known as African American Vernacular English or AAVE) as the primary language of African American children. The board was concerned that many of the school children came from homes where Ebonics was spoken, and that Ebonics is significantly

different from Standard English. The linguistic differences between Ebonics and Standard English were sufficiently major that these children experienced huge language learning obstacles. The school board's intention was that explicit acknowledgement of these differences would allow the school to formally implement pedagogical measures that took into specific account the differences. For example, teachers could address the use of Ebonics in the language classroom, and perhaps even treat knowledge of Ebonics as a resource for helping students acquire Standard English. Unfortunately, this decision was undermined by public fear that teachers would actually attempt to teach Ebonics in the classroom or allow students to use it in essays and tests, even though this was never the intention.

Thus, arguments about what is Standard English, and, by implication, what is non-standard, are not merely linguistic in nature. Precisely because English is considered a major language where competence in the standard variety is seen as being useful, if not actually necessary, for socio-economic advancement, any attempt to legitimize non-standard Englishes, however well intentioned, can run into serious opposition, even from those who might benefit from such a move.

Key areas of dispute and debate

The key area of dispute, particularly among language scholars, involves the nature of Standard English – which is a specific instantiation of a more general question concerning the nature of standards in language. This is not to say that such disputes do not take place in policy contexts or in society in general. But when such disputes occur in these latter domains, there is usually a presumption that language experts can provide a clear resolution to the matter; hence, there can be impatience and frustration when these experts do not agree among themselves or when they try to explain why the issue is actually a matter of some complexity.

Basically, the main question relates to how seriously to take the notion of language change and therefore whether to conceive of Standard English as primarily a product or a process. This relates to another area of dispute, which is whether to understand the nature of Standard English in primarily linguistic or non-linguistic terms, where adopting the latter means giving serious recognition to the influences of social and political factors.

No one would deny that the English language has undergone changes in grammar, lexis, and pronunciation. The issue therefore is to what extent such changes are considered negligible, such that the language can be said to be fundamentally the same. Once we acknowledge that what counts as standard inevitably changes because of the variation that inheres in the language practices of different speakers, and moreover, that there are ideological influences at work in deciding just what kind of variation to accept as being standard and what to reject as being non-standard, then we have to also acknowledge the inescapable relevance of non-linguistic factors in defining Standard English and, more generally, standards in English. In this regard, recall that Honey insists on 'educatedness' (1997: 235) as the hallmark of Standard English speakers, though he also allows for other, sufficiently 'high-status' individuals or circumstances (1997: 161–162):

graduation from (often famous) universities, or literary reputation, or the ability in all other respects to use the language in highly acceptable ways – or [people] who are in some way other high-status figures (like royalty).

This immediately makes clear how the notion of standards in English is dependent on social and political factors, and there is no reason at all why Honey's specific choice of 'high-status

figures' should prevail over the choices of other 'language mavens' (Pinker 1994). More generally and enduringly, although no less problematic, is the assumption that standards can be guaranteed by looking to the practices and intuitions of traditional native speakers of English. This reliance on the traditional native speaker persists and is extremely difficult to dislodge. Thus, Braine (1999) documents the various problems faced by non-native teachers of English, and Chelliah (2001) notes that study guides to the English language in India still rely on the traditional native speaker. The problem with this position, as Rampton (1990) observes, is that it confuses linguistic competence (an acquired property) with racial characteristics (an inherited trait). As a result, Tupas and Rubdy (2015: 3) make reference to the notion of unequal Englishes where 'The spotlight is on the unequal ways and situations in which Englishes are arranged, configured, and contested.'

Tupas and Rubdy's reference to how Englishes are 'arranged, configured, and contested' highlights the importance of attending to issues of language ontology.

Here, it is worth keeping in mind Bell's (2013) observation that sociolinguists do not often enough ask the question 'What is language?' even though such a question is not merely one of abstract metaphysical interest but in fact carries major implications for our understanding of the relationship between language and society, including implications for language policy. This is all the more so in the case of standards in English. At bottom, these areas of dispute – product versus process, linguistic versus non-linguistic factors – are about matters of ontology. That is, our understanding of what constitutes Standard English as well as our general acceptance of standards depends on just how much variation in language practices we are prepared to countenance or reject, and on what bases – where such bases will often involve language ideologies that are in themselves influenced by social and political considerations. In this regard, Widdowson (1994: 379) observes that

the authority to maintain the standard language is not consequent on a natural native-speaker endowment. It is claimed by a minority of people who have the power to impose it. The custodians of standard English are self-elected members of a rather exclusive club.

But Widdowson (1994: 382) also points out that the global spread of Standard English has led to it being used by various communities for multiple purposes and 'these transcend traditional communal and cultural boundaries . . . develop their own conventions [and] standards [so that] you do not need native speakers to tell you what [the standard] is' (1994: 382).

It is therefore useful to distinguish between approaches that are ontologically naïve and approaches that are ontologically curious. As regards the former, consider the following statement from Honey (1997: 81):

The study of school text books for spelling, reading, writing, and speaking make it abundantly clear that between the sixteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries there was an ever more widely held notion of a standard form of English, all the elements of which were realistically accessible through book-learning.

Despite his acknowledgement of social and historical change (i.e. the references to time periods), the statement carries the suggestion that once the notion of 'a standard form of English' emerged, questions about the social, historical and political factors that played a role in its emergence, continued legitimacy, and possible dismantling no longer carry any import. This is not to say that Honey is not aware that the legitimacy of the notion of a standard might be challenged. His reference to 'enemies' of Standard English bears testament to this

awareness. Rather, the point here is that he considers any serious academic questioning about the nature of Standard English as evidence of the ‘enemies’ at work. This is why it is not inaccurate to consider his approach ontologically naïve. Thus, Crowley (1999: 272, italics added), in commenting on this very statement of Honey’s, makes the following cogent observation:

Its danger lies in the *presupposition* that there is in some sense standard (written) English and standard (spoken) English and that they share a common structure. It is as though standard English were an ideal form of the language which is realised in practice by ‘the best’ users of English in the forms of standard written and spoken English.

This presupposition that the structure of Standard English is common to both written and spoken forms and that it can be found in the language practices of the ‘best users’ is such an article of faith that those who dare subject this presupposition to scrutiny are, as mentioned earlier, accused of attempting to engage in a conspiracy to impede the cognitive and social progress of certain segments of society.

In contrast, an ontologically curious position takes seriously the question of just how languages, including Standard English and its non-standard counterparts, are constituted, and avoids in particular taking the name of a variety at face value. This latter point is important to keep in mind because, as Park and Wee (2012: chapter 1) observe, there is a tendency to use a language name such as ‘Standard English’ as though it unproblematically refers to a set of language practices whilst ignoring the ideological work (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) that goes into linking the name to the practices. By ignoring the ideological assumptions that link the name to the practices, there is a serious danger of treating Standard English as a stable product, that is, the uncritical use of the name gives the impression that the name refers to a bounded and stable set of languages practices. The problem here is that the variation and changeability in language practices, as well as the ideological influences that lead some speakers and institutions to accept certain practices as ‘Standard English’ while rejecting others then go un-interrogated. This is a point that Schneider (2011: 155) makes in his discussion of English in Asia, where he notes that a label like ‘Chinese English’, ‘unless understood very loosely and non-technically, implies more homogeneity than is warranted’.

The ramifications of a failure to be ontologically curious can be significant for our scholarly attempts to better understand the nature of standards in English. As Park and Wee (2013: 352) point out,

Our research habitus that presumes language as bounded, enumerable, discrete varieties leads us to consider names as mere labels for pre-existing entities. Under this view, the linguist’s assigning of names to certain sets of linguistic practices is no more than a neutral act of reference; the linguist is in no way interfering into the reality being studied, which makes this research activity completely objective and scientific. But as we have seen above, this obscures issues of descriptive adequacy and commensurability of labels, and more importantly, the fact that names are socially constituted.

Future directions

We know that a language is not simply reducible to its lexical inventory since this would only capture a listing of lexical items without giving due recognition to the degrees of regularities

(‘rules’) that govern how these items can be used or combined. At the same time, we also know that both the words and combinatorial patterns change. New words and phrases come into existence and get accepted as conventional or grammatical.

In the case of English, as it spreads globally and comes into contact with other languages, new social and cultural environments (including new speakers, new literacy events, new technologies of communication), new varieties of English start to emerge as a result of what is both a sociolinguistically natural as well as an inevitable process. This means that it is necessary to recognize the material and symbolic dimensions of language without necessarily giving priority to one over the other. This is a point that is entirely consistent with thinking of language as an assemblage.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 406) tell us that an assemblage is a contingent mix of practices and things, where this contingent ensemble of physical and non-physical objects – broadly characterizable as ‘semiotic’ – is distinguished from yet other contingent ensembles in being ‘selected, organized, stratified’ and hence demarcated from an otherwise endless flow of circulating signs. So, even though assemblages are always in the process of ‘coming together and moving apart’ (Wise 2005: 77), this patently does not mean that at a given point in time, there is neither structure nor order to them.

It therefore needs to be emphasized that assemblages are organized and ordered; but also that this organization and order is contingent and changeable. The significant advantage of thinking in terms of an assemblage, then, is that it recognizes the role that boundedness plays in ontology, even as it at the very same time insists that we acknowledge that the boundaries can be multiple, contested, and shifting.

The concept of an assemblage therefore encourages us to further examine prevailing assumptions about the ontology of language. Why, for example, should we limit the material dimension to words (whether spoken or written)? On what grounds do we exclude the speakers/writers or the mode of communication (phone, book, blog)? Consider what we understand by graffiti. It is ‘outlawed literacy’ or ‘criminalized’ (Conquergood 1997: 354–355) precisely because its appearance on public surfaces is ‘deemed a threat to property, propriety and pristine walls’ (Pennycook 2008: 137). Once abstracted away from the public surface on which words and pictures may have been illegally painted, the language used no longer constitutes graffiti.

This way of understanding the ontology of objects – including the ontology of language – is actually quite radical, as Haggerty and Ericson (2000: 608, *italics added*) observe:

‘Assemblages’ consist of a ‘multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they “work” together as a functional entity’ (Patton 1994: 158). They comprise discrete flows of an essentially limitless range of other phenomena such as people, signs, chemicals, knowledge and institutions. *To dig beneath the surface stability of any entity is to encounter a host of different phenomena and processes working in concert.* The radical nature of this vision becomes more apparent when one realizes how any particular assemblage is itself composed of different discrete assemblages which are themselves multiple.

Thus, once we accept the idea of ontology in terms of assemblages, then, purely as a matter of conceptual consistency and coherence, we have to recognize that the constituent parts of assemblages are themselves further assemblages, and so on.

This brings us to two possible directions for future research worth exploring. The first has to do with how specific understandings of standards in English are assembled. From an

assemblage perspective, we should no longer focus simply on the assembling of linguistic elements (although this is certainly part of the picture). Rather, we need to also consider how non-linguistic elements are actually parts of the assemblage, even if these are not usually recognized as such. In addition, we need to keep in mind that the parts of any assemblage are themselves also assemblages and are therefore also capable of continual transformation. As an illustration, let us return to Honey's definition of Standard English. Honey is keen to treat Standard English as a purely or primarily linguistic entity, one that has a common structure across its written and spoken forms. But the difficulties involved in abstracting out this common structure in any comprehensive or meaningful manner while at the same time excluding non-standard varieties make it clear that the assemblage that he wants to identify as 'Standard English' is one that is ultimately of his own making. And his reliance on educated speakers makes it clear that the assemblage he has in mind in fact extends beyond the linguistic to the social and political. Moreover, his inability to provide a clear definition of educatedness reminds us how the notion of educatedness itself is yet another assemblage. The point in critiquing Honey's notion of Standard English as an assemblage is not to suggest that it is somehow problematic qua assemblage. All other attempts to propose alternative ways of understanding standards in English are themselves also assemblages. Any talk of standards in English is, inescapably, reference to a composite entity. It therefore behooves those of us who are intent on offering or critiquing alternative assemblages of standards to be sensitive to the kinds of elements that are being included or omitted, and why.

The second line of research follows from the first, although taking on a more applied orientation. Since linguistics assemblages can (and in fact do) involve non-linguistic elements, how might developments such as the use of digital technologies and the emergence of the phenomenon often referred to as superdiversity (Vertovec 2006) affect standards in English? For example, it is well known (and perhaps all too often lamented) that social media is changing the ways in which English manifests itself. But to dismiss the English found in social media as 'informal' or 'colloquial' and thus not really standard is to already pre-judge the issue of how standards arise and are constructed. It also ignores the fact that social media is increasingly used for professional purposes and the construction of professional personae.

Likewise, the phenomenon known as superdiversity emphasizes that there have been changes to social and demographic patterns that no longer fall along the traditional lines of ethnic boundaries or even social class. In his discussion of British society, Vertovec (2006: 1) describes superdiversity as a 'dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants' and suggests that its implications for language mixing and multilingualism have yet to be fully understood (2006: 26). In this regard, Blommaert (2012: 3) has pointed out that

Language, as we have seen, is no longer a fixed thing; it is also no longer a unified thing, and globalization processes again prompt us to take this seriously. Standard English is distributed in the world in fundamentally different ways than, say, HipHop English . . . So statements about 'the spread of English' to place X or Y instantly beg the question: which English? Which specific resources we associate with English are effectively being spread to X and Y? And what do people in X or Y effectively do with these resources? What are their precise functions in the multilingual contexts in which they enter, and in the multilingual repertoires of users?

The increased diversity of English language speakers together with newer technologies of communication cannot help but affect the ways in which the language is spoken. Thus, it is a highly relevant and indeed pertinent question to ask about the impact of these developments on standards in English, since they also carry significant implications for language education policy including language pedagogical initiatives and assessments of language competence. Indeed, it may even be the case that such developments lead to greater appreciation of just how ideologized the notion of a standard is, so that a more reflexive even playful attitude towards standards will emerge. If so, while the idea of a standard may not necessarily disappear, it might at least become less important or treated with less seriousness – which might not be such a bad thing altogether.

Further reading

- Ives, P. (2015) ‘Global English and inequality: The contested ground of linguistic power’, in R. Tupas (ed.), *Unequal Englishes: The Politics of Englishes Today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 74–91. Ives provides a macro-political perspective on the notion of inequality and how this intersects with the issue of linguistic differentiation. His starting point is that too many linguists have focused on inequality as resulting from differences between speakers, and not given enough consideration to broader structural relationships that between linguistic varieties.
- Lippi-Green, R. (2011) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. Abingdon: Routledge. In this important book, Lippi-Green looks at American attitudes towards language. She makes use of examples from the classroom, the court, as well as the media to demonstrate how linguistic discrimination, in this case, discrimination based on accent, serves to perpetuate unequal social structures.
- Henry, E. S. (2010) Interpretations of “Chinglish”: Native speakers, language learners and the enregisterment of a stigmatized code. *Language in Society* 39: 669–688. Henry examines Chinglish, which he points out tends to be seen as a ‘deformed’ version of Standard English. His goal is to show how discourses about Chinglish in China are in fact also discourses about China’s anxieties over whether it is possible to be both Asian and modern at the same time. By examining how particular speech forms are metadiscursively labeled ‘Chinglish’ and how such acts of labeling are related to the politics of language learning, his analysis helps to demonstrate how different key actors in China’s English language education industry hold different understandings of what Chinglish is.

Related topics

- English and colonialism
- World Englishes: disciplinary debates and future directions
- Contact Englishes.

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