

Education and Social Standing with regard to Standard English and Pronunciation

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Education and Social Standing

Within each of the dialect areas, there is considerable variation in speech according to education and social standing. There is an important polarity of uneducated and educated speech in which the former can be identified with the regional dialect most completely and the latter moves away from the dialect usage to a form of English that cuts across dialect boundaries. On the other hand, there is no simple equation of dialectal and uneducated English. Just as educated English cuts across dialectal boundaries, so do many features of uneducated use: a prominent example is the double negative as in *I don't want no cake*, which has been outlawed from all educated English by the prescriptive grammar tradition for hundreds of years but which continues to thrive in uneducated speech wherever English is spoken.

Educated speech- by definition the language of education- naturally tends to be given the additional prestige of government agencies, the learned professions, the political parties, the press, the law court and the pulpit- any institution which must attempt to address itself to a public beyond the smallest dialectal community. The general acceptance of 'BBC English' for this purpose over almost half a century is paralleled by a similar designation for general educated idiom in the United States, 'network English.' By reason of the fact that educated English is thus accorded implicit social and political sanction, it comes to be referred to as Standard English, and provided we remember that this does not mean an English that has been formally standardized by official action, as weights and measures are standardized, the term is useful and appropriate. In contrast with Standard English, forms that are especially associated with uneducated (rather than dialectal) use are often called 'substandard.'

Standard English

The degree of acceptance of a single standard of English throughout the world, across multiplicity of political and social systems, is a truly remarkable phenomenon: the more so since the extent of the uniformity involved has, if anything, increased in the present century. Uniformity is greatest in what is from most viewpoints the relatively unimportant matter of spelling. Although printing houses in all English-speaking countries retain a tiny area of individual decision (some preferring *-ise* and others *-ize* in words like *realise*; some preferring *judgment* and others *judgement*; etc), there is basically a single system, with two minor subsystems. The one is the subsystem with British orientation (used in all English-speaking countries except the United States) with distinctive forms in only a small class of words, *colour*, *centre*, *levelled*, etc. The other is the American subsystem: *color*, *center*, *leveled*, etc. In Canada, the British subsystem is used for the most part, but some publishers (especially of popular material) follow the American subsystem and some a mixture (*color* but *centre*). In the American Mid-West, some newspaper publishers (but not book publishers) use a few additional separate spellings such as *thru* for *through*.

In grammar and vocabulary, Standard English presents somewhat less of a monolithic character, but even so the world-wide agreement is extra-ordinary and- as has been suggested earlier- seems actually to be increasing under the impact of closer world communication and the spread of identical culture, both material and non-material. The uniformity is especially close in neutral or formal styles of written English on subject matter not of obviously localized interest: in such circumstances one can frequently go on for page after page without encountering a feature which would identify the English as belonging to one of the *national standards*.

Pronunciation and Standard English

The list does not exhaust the regional or national variants that approximate to the status of a standard (the Caribbean might be mentioned, for example), but the important point to stress is that all of them are remarkable primarily in the trivial extent to which even the most firmly established, BrE and AmE, differ from each other in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. We have been careful, however, not to mention pronunciation in this connection. Pronunciation distinguishes one national standard from another most immediately and completely, and links in a most obvious way the national standards to the regional varieties.

In BrE, one type of pronunciation comes close to enjoying the status of 'standard': 'Received Pronunciation' or 'RP.' Because this has been largely associated with a private education system based upon boarding schools insulated from the locality in which they happen to have been situated, it is significantly non-regional and of considerable prestige.