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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses difficulties in defining Standard American English, and the question of whether there is a need to define it. Several theories on why such a dialect should be defined are described. These are: the "propriety" theory, the "psychological" theory, the "power and prestige" theory, and the "better tool" theory, the "psychological" Standard American English is offered, but it is concluded that there is no real Standard American English to define, and no pressing need to define it.
(AM)

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Can (and Should) Standard American English Be Defined

In a way, any attempt to define Standard American English is redundant, because the folk already know what it is: it is that kind of English which they do not speak. Patty Keene knows this, even though she is only a minor character in Breakfast of Champions, a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Patty, as her creator tells us,

was used to apologizing for her use of language. She had been encouraged to do a lot of that in school. Most white people in Midland City were insecure when they spoke, so they kept their sentences short and their words simple, in order to keep embarrassing mistakes to a minimum. . . .

This was because their English teachers would wince and cover their ears and give them flunking grades and so on whenever they failed to speak like English aristocrats before the First World War.¹

But though this description may satisfy Patty, the question today is, presumably, whether we can define Standard American English to our own satisfaction.

Definitions of a standard dialect are not hard to find, of course, and courtesy, if nothing else, demands that we examine those first. A freshman handbook used by thousands says "Standard English is the language used by educated people, the language that commands respect and esteem, that provides social and professional status."² This example is so familiar to all here in both content and wording that its value as a representative will not be challenged.

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The echoes of similar definitions resound through the shelves of handbooks, books on usage and compositions, books on sociolinguistics, and so on. But one of the terms cries for closer examination--who are "educated people"? I consult a doctor with medical degrees from Duke University and Johns Hopkins; he numbers a state governor among his patients; he even comes from "good family," being related to a university professor so eminent that even Time magazine has noticed him. Yet, when this doctor wrote me a prescription for hypodermic needles, he misspelled gauge. (I would be happy to document this error, but the druggist, perhaps suspecting my intentions, refused to let me retain the original prescription blank.) Clearly nothing in our language is so standardized as spelling, but as we can see, it's not a reliable index of what we would all want to call education. Two further handbooks show the additional difficulties we run into when deciding who "educated people" are.

The first shows that some animals are indeed more equal than others: it defines an "illiterate usage" as "one which occurs in the speech of uneducated persons but not in the writing of educated professionals. . . ." ³ You are therefore safe unless you happen to be in the wrong profession, since the same source goes on to say, "The more deliberate inventions of advertising copywriters ('our whisper-weight wool dress, to be accessorized [sic] casually') have little chance of being widely used or accepted and can be considered illiteracies." ⁴

Advertising writers can take heart though--they are not alone in the outer darkness; they are joined by well-educated conformists. As another handbook says: Some speakers show a strong desire to conform. They may even know that there are guidelines for choices between who-whom, I-me, and bad-badly, but lack confidence or experience to apply them correctly.

It is highly unlikely that an uneducated speaker would fall into the unnaturalness and incorrectness of sentences like Whom do you think you are? They gave the present to him and I, or I felt badly about the error. Ungrammatical uses of this kind represent an "educated nonstandard" English.⁵

The more works we consult, the more the speakers of standard English dwindle.

Wolfram and Fasold phrase their definition this way:

In every society, there are people who are in a position to use their judgments about what is good and bad in language in making decisions affecting other people. The most obvious such people in our society are school teachers and employers responsible for placing people in public-contact positions. . . . our use of the term "Standard American English" will refer to the informal standard language of teachers and employers of people who fill public-contact positions, and of other speakers whose speech resembles the speech of these two groups.⁶

The definition continues with a dazzling non sequitur: "Standard American English, then, will be the real spoken language of the educated middle class."⁷ If you are willing to believe that personnel directors are educated and public-school teachers make enough money to be considered middle-class, you might think the definition has some validity.

In any event, the intersection of the sets of speakers honored in these works gives us the following composite definition of Standard American English: "the language of confident, experienced, non-conformist teachers and personnel directors when they are not writing advertising copy."

Perhaps the search for a definition is premature; let us turn to the more

important question, the one presumed by our search: should we define Standard American English? For some, the definition of standard English becomes a means to a very clearly visualized end. William Labov closed one paper by discussing those children "who need the ability to use Standard English, [but] do not learn this form of the language."⁸ In a discussion that followed, Labov was asked to enumerate "the five indices of Standard English in New York City" that had been the subject matter of his study. These, remember, are part of the language that children need to be able to use. They are:

"1. The use of r in post-vocalic and pre-consonantal position (guard, horse, but not including work and shirt--which are special cases)."

Thanks to Labov's special cases, the Chancellor of my university, who habitually says [wəlk] and [səIt], can continue to believe that he speaks Standard English.

"2. The vowel of bad, ask, dance, had, cash.

3. The stressed vowel in awful, coffee, and office.

4. The use of (θ) in thing and thin.

5. The use of (ð) in then and the."⁹

Do New Yorkers really need to pronounce bad as [bæd] rather than [bæəd]? After all, the Senate Rules Committee was concerned not with how Nelson Rockefeller pronounced cash but with how he distributed it.

William Labov is further quoted as mentioning "that one of the most important social contrasts in American English is found in the /ɑ/ → /ɔ/ collapse. He estimated that people in about half the geographic area of the U. S. have no contrast between 'hock' and 'hawk' or between 'cot' and 'caught.'"¹⁰ I am not entirely sure what this means--what, for example, is an "important social contrast"?--but on one reading it seems to state that those who lack the contrast,

like me, don't quite speak standard English.

"Should we define Standard American English" would be answered positively by other writers for other reasons, four of which we have time to mention. The first might be called the "propriety" or "Amy Vanderbilt" theory. I think we all agree that different styles of speech are appropriate on different occasions, but too often the theory confuses dialect with diction and makes statements about syntax that would be hard to defend. Recent political events have perhaps given this approach a new respectability: as one writer put it several years ago, "The vocabulary, idiom, and grammatical patterns appropriate in the locker room would be out of place . . . in the President's office."¹¹ To that I say "Amen"--but perhaps for other reasons.

Wolfram and Fasold provide us with a second reason for defining and using a standard, one we might call the "psychological theory"; according to it, a standard language . . . may serve a unifying function by linking an individual speaker with a larger community. Whereas the unifying function may unite individual speakers, what is identified as the separatist function opposes the standard language to other languages or varieties as a separate entity, thus potentially serving as a symbol of national identity.¹²

The authors are quite confident of the power of these functions to homogenize the language: "language standardization seems to be inevitable in American society, as it is in most of the countries of the world. . . ."¹³ Or, with even more assurance, "we must realistically concede that the establishment of prescriptive norms for 'correct' speech is an inevitable by-product of the awareness of behavioral norms of all types."¹⁴ Two problems come to mind with

this theory: if language standardization, like Marxism, marches to the tune of historical inevitability, why do prescriptivists find it so difficult to help it along? Why do they even find it necessary? The second problem is the counterexample provided by countries like Switzerland, that seem to lack a desire for a single language, let alone a single dialect. Woodstock should have taught us that a nation is not a state but a state of mind, and we may well doubt whether a black Harlem cabbie, a white Richmond lawyer, and a Chicano farmer all find their idea of national identity fulfilled in just the same way.

Next there is the "power and prestige" theory. According to this, the rich and influential have matters their own way in language, too, and they won't smile on you if you don't talk like they do. Standard English, according to one analyst, consists of "the speech habits of one linguistic group--the group, not surprisingly, containing nearly all the most powerful members of society."¹⁵ If this is indeed the case, one wonders why the speech of the middle class need be bothered with at all--we should be out there interviewing the Vanderbilts, the Mellons, and the Hunts if we want to find standard English. Yet wealth and power do not seem to be infallible guides to good English: no President since I became politically aware--not Eisenhower nor Kennedy nor Johnson nor Nixon--has had his speech escape unscathed from those who like to comment on other people's English.

Finally, there is what we might call the "better tool" theory. This notion commits one to the belief that "the sort of standard English appropriate for formal and some informal writing . . . is necessary for the serious business of the world, and any student hoping to exert influence on affairs must command it. . . . a carpenter cuts a board with a saw . . . because it works better

than a breadknife. Standard English is necessary because it works better for serious purposes."¹⁶ Surely the authors are here talking about vocabulary, and if so, their theory cannot be seriously maintained. The fallacy lies in an inability to decide whether standard English is a matter of pronunciation or vocabulary or both. On the one hand, some proponents of the theory want to maintain that a speaker is using the standard if he calls a piece of furniture a [čer] but using a dialect if he calls it a [čir]. But if this distinction is true, then it is pronunciation that determines which brand you speak, and one can be using dialect while saying "Turn on the electrostatic precipitator," just as surely as when saying "Turn on the spigot."

The most degenerate form of the theory becomes factually false in statements like this: "The written language of metropolitan areas has an advantage in its wider range of sentence patterns and its very much larger vocabulary, as compared with the dialects spoken in the provinces or backwoods."¹⁷ Of course, no city dweller uses a single sentence pattern that the loneliest mountaineer does not also use. As a final comment on the question of the size of rural and urban vocabularies, I cannot resist quoting the poem "I Called Them Trees," by Gerald Barrax:

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In conclusion, we might well ask what pressing need there is to define a presently non-existing dialect, a dialect, moreover, that would certainly raise more problems than it solved. A standard dialect is sometimes a useful fiction, to be sure, just as a purely synchronic state of a language is a useful fiction, but that utility hardly argues for the establishment of a standard that, as Johnson said of an Academy, "every man would have been willing, and many would have been proud to disobey."

To end on a positive note, let me introduce my own definition of Standard American English: "those parts of phonology, syntax, and vocabulary that all dialects hold in common."

NOTES

- ¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Breakfast of Champions (n.p.: Delacorte Press, 1973), p. 142.
- ²Robert M. Gorrell and Charlton Laird, Modern English Handbook, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 598.
- ³Langdon Elsbree and Frederick Bracher, Heath's College Handbook of Composition, 8th ed. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1972), p. 277.
- ⁴Elsbree-Bracher, p. 278.
- ⁵William F. Irscher, The Holt Guide to English (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1972), p. 377.
- ⁶Walt Wolfram and Ralph W. Fasold, The Study of Social Dialects in American English (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 21.
- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸William Labov, "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English," reprinted in Social Dialects and Language Learning, Roger W. Shuy, ed. (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1964), p. 497.
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 498-499.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 499.
- ¹¹Elsbree-Bracher, p. 271.
- ¹²Wolfram-Fasold, p. 22.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 23.
- ¹⁵Frederick Crews, The Random House Handbook (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 173.

¹⁶Gorrell-Laird, p. 600.

¹⁷Elsbree-Bracher, pp. 348-349.

¹⁸Gerald W. Barrax, "I Called them Trees," in Another Kind of Rain
(Pittsburgh: U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), pp. 40-41.