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1 Standard English

English is probably the most widely used language in the world, with around 400 million native speakers and a similar number of bilingual speakers in several dozen partially English-speaking countries, and hundreds of millions more users in other countries where English is widely known and used in business, government, or media. It is used for government communications in India; a daily newspaper in Cairo; and the speeches in the parliament of Papua New Guinea. You may hear it when a hotel receptionist greets an Iranian guest in Helsinki; when a German professor talks to a Japanese graduate student in Amsterdam; or when a Korean scientist lectures to Hungarian and Nigerian colleagues at a conference in Bangkok.

A language so widely distributed naturally has many varieties. These are known as **dialects**.¹ That word doesn't apply just to rural or uneducated forms of speech; the way we use it here, everyone speaks a dialect. And naturally, this book doesn't try to describe all the different dialects of English there are. It concentrates on one central dialect that is particularly important: the one that we call **Standard English**.

We can't give a brief definition of Standard English; in a sense, the point of this whole book is precisely to provide that definition. But we can make a few remarks about its special status.

The many varieties of English spoken around the world differ mainly in **pronunciation** (or 'accent'), and to a lesser extent in **vocabulary**, and those aspects of language (which are mentioned but not covered in detail in this book) do tend to give indications of the speaker's geographical and social links. But things are very different with **grammar**, which deals with the form of sentences and smaller units: clauses, phrases and words. The grammar of Standard English is much more stable and uniform than

¹ We use **boldface** for technical terms when they are first introduced. Sometimes later occurrences are also boldfaced to remind you that the expression is a technical term or to highlight it in a context where the discussion contributes to an understanding of the category or function concerned.

its pronunciation or word stock: there is remarkably little dispute about what is **grammatical** (in compliance with the rules of grammar) and what isn't.

Of course, the small number of controversial points that there are – trouble spots like *who* versus *whom* – get all the public discussion in language columns and letters to the editor, so it may seem as if there is much turmoil; but the passions evinced over such problematic points should not obscure the fact that for the vast majority of questions about what's allowed in Standard English, the answers are clear.²

Moreover, in its written form, Standard English is regarded worldwide as an uncontroversial choice for something like an editorial on a serious subject in any English-language newspaper, whether in Britain, the USA, Australia, Africa, or India. It is true that a very few minor points of difference can be found between the American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) forms of Standard English; for example, BrE speakers will often use *She may have done* where an AmE speaker would say *She may have*; but for the most part using Standard English doesn't even identify which side of the Atlantic the user comes from, let alone indicate membership in some regional, ethnic, or social group.

Alongside Standard English there are many robust local, regional, and social dialects of English that are clearly and uncontroversially **non-standard**. They are in many cases familiar to Standard English speakers from plays and films and songs and daily conversations in a diverse community. In [1] we contrast two non-standard expressions with Standard English equivalents, using an exclamation mark (!) to indicate that a sentence belongs to a non-standard dialect, not the standard one.

| | | |
|-----|---|---|
| [1] | STANDARD | NON-STANDARD |
| | i a. <i>I did it myself.</i> | b. <i>!I done it myself.</i> |
| | ii a. <i>I haven't told anybody anything.</i> | b. <i>!I ain't told nobody nothing.</i> |

We should note at this point that elsewhere we use a per cent sign to mark a Standard English form used by some speakers but not all (thus we write *%It mayn't happen* because some Standard English speakers use *mayn't* and some don't). And when our focus is entirely on Standard English, as it is throughout most of the book, we use an asterisk to mark sequences that are not grammatical (e.g., **Ran the away dog*), ignoring the issue of whether that sequence of words might occur in some non-standard dialects. In [1], though, we're specifically talking about the sentences of a non-standard dialect.

Done in [ib] is a widespread non-standard 'past tense' form of the verb *do*, corresponding to Standard English *did* – in the standard dialect *done* is what is called a 'past participle', used after *have* (*I have done it*) or *be* (*It was done yesterday*).³

² For example, try writing down the four words *the, dog, ran, away* in all twenty-four possible orders. You will find that just three orders turn out to be grammatical, and there can be no serious disagreement among speakers as to which they are.

³ Throughout this book we use bold italics to represent items from the dictionary independently of the various forms they have when used in sentences: *did* is one of the forms of the item listed in dictionaries as *do* (the others are *does, done, and doing*); and *was* is one of the forms of the item listed as *be*.

In [ii] there are two differences between the standard and non-standard versions. First, *ain't* is a well-known non-standard form (here meaning “haven’t”); and second, [iib] exhibits multiple marking of negation: the clause is marked three times as negative (in *ain't*, *nobody*, and *nothing*), whereas in [iia] it is marked just once (in *haven't*).

Features of this sort would not be used in something like a TV news bulletin or a newspaper editorial because they are generally agreed to be non-standard. That doesn't mean dialects exhibiting such features are deficient, or illogical, or intrinsically inferior to the standard dialect. Indeed, as we point out in our discussion of negation in Ch. 8, many standard languages (they include French, Italian, Polish, and Russian) show multiple marking of negation similar to that in [1ii]. It's a special grammatical fact about Standard English that it happens to lack multiple negation marking of this kind.

Formal and informal style

The distinction between standard and non-standard dialects of English is quite different from the distinction between **formal** and **informal style**, which we illustrate in [2]:

| | | |
|-----|--|---|
| [2] | FORMAL | INFORMAL |
| i | a. <i>He was the one with whom she worked.</i> | b. <i>He was the one she worked with.</i> |
| ii | a. <i>She must be taller than I.</i> | b. <i>She must be taller than me.</i> |

In these pairs, BOTH versions belong to the standard dialect, so there is no call for the exclamation mark notation. Standard English allows for plenty of variation in style depending on the context in which the language is being used. The [a] versions would generally be used only in quite formal contexts. In casual conversation they would very probably be regarded as pedantic or pompous. In most contexts, therefore, it is the [b] version, the informal one, that would be preferred. The informal Standard English sentences in [b] occur side by side with the formal variants; they aren't non-standard, and they aren't inferior to the formal counterparts in [a].

Informal style is by no means restricted to speech. Informal style is now quite common in newspapers and magazines. They generally use a mixture of styles: a little more informal for some topics, a little more formal for others. And informal style is also becoming more common in printed books on academic subjects. We've chosen to write this book in a fairly informal style. If we hadn't, we wouldn't be using *we've* or *hadn't*, we'd be using *we have* and *had not*.

Perhaps the key difference between style and dialect is that switching between styles within your native dialect is a normal ability that everyone has, while switching between dialects is a special ability that only some people have. Every speaker of a language with style levels knows how to use their native language more formally (and maybe sound more pompous) or talk informally (and sound more friendly and casual). But to snap into a different dialect is not something that

everyone can do. If you weren't raised speaking two dialects, you have to be something of an actor to do it, or else something of a linguist. Either way you have to actually become acquainted with the rules of the other dialect. Some people are much better than others at this. It isn't something that is expected of everyone. Many (probably most) Standard English speakers will be entirely unable to do a convincing London working-class, or African American vernacular, or Scottish highlands dialect. Yet all of them know how to recognise the difference in style between the [a] sentences and the [b] sentences in [2], and they know when to use which.

2 Descriptive and prescriptive approaches to grammar

There is an important distinction to be drawn between two kinds of books on English grammar: a book may have either a **descriptive** or a **prescriptive** goal.

Descriptive books try to describe the grammatical system that underlies the way people actually speak and write the language. That's what our book aims to do: we want to describe what Standard English is like.

Prescriptive books aim to tell people how they should speak and write – to give advice on how to use the language. They typically take the form of **usage manuals**, though school textbook treatments of grammar also tend to be prescriptive.

In principle you could imagine descriptive and prescriptive approaches not being in conflict at all: the descriptive grammar books would explain what the language is like, and the prescriptive ones would tell you how to avoid mistakes when using it. Not making mistakes would mean using the language in a way that agreed with the descriptive account. The two kinds of book could agree on the facts. And indeed there are some very good usage books based on thorough descriptive research into how Standard English is spoken and written. But there is also a long tradition of prescriptive works that are deeply flawed: they simply don't represent things correctly or coherently, and some of their advice is bad advice.

Perhaps the most important failing of the bad usage books is that they frequently do not make the distinction we just made between **STANDARD VS NON-STANDARD DIALECTS** on the one hand and **FORMAL VS INFORMAL STYLE** on the other. They apply the term 'incorrect' not only to non-standard usage like the [b] forms in [1] but also to informal constructions like the [b] forms in [2]. But it isn't sensible to call a construction grammatically incorrect when people whose status as fully competent speakers of the standard language is unassailable use it nearly all the time. Yet that's what (in effect) many prescriptive manuals do.

Often they acknowledge that what we are calling informal constructions are widely used, but they choose to describe them as incorrect all the same. Here's a fairly typical passage, dealing with another construction where the issue is the

choice between *I* and *me* (and corresponding forms of other pronouns):

- [3] Such common expressions as *it's me* and *was it them?* are incorrect, because the verb *to be* cannot take the accusative: the correct expressions are *it's I* and *was it they?* But general usage has led to their acceptance, and even to gentle ridicule of the correct version.⁴

By 'take the accusative' the author means occur followed by accusative pronoun forms like *me*, *them*, *us*, etc., as opposed to the nominative forms *I*, *they*, *we*, etc. (see Ch. 5, §8.2). The book we quote in [3] is saying that there is a rule of English grammar requiring a nominative form where a pronoun is 'complement' of the verb *be* (see Ch. 4, §4.1). But there isn't any such rule. A rule saying that would fail to allow for a construction we all use most of the time: just about everyone says *It's me*. There will be no ridicule of *It is I* in this book; but we will point out the simple fact that it represents an unusually formal style of speech.

What we're saying is that when there is a conflict between a proposed rule of grammar and the stable usage of millions of experienced speakers who say what they mean and mean what they say, it's got to be the proposed rule that's wrong, not the usage. Certainly, people do make mistakes – more in speech than in writing, and more when they're tired, stressed, or drunk. But if I'm outside on your doorstep and I call out *It's me*, that isn't an accidental slip on my part. It's the normal Standard English way to confirm my identity to someone who knows me but can't see me. Calling it a mistake would be quite unwarranted.

Grammar rules must ultimately be based on facts about how people speak and write. If they don't have that basis, they have no basis at all. The rules are supposed to reflect the language the way it is, and the people who know it and use it are the final authority on that. And where the people who speak the language distinguish between formal and informal ways of saying the same thing, the rules must describe that variation too.

This book is descriptive in its approach, and insofar as space permits we cover informal as well as formal style. But we also include a number of boxes headed 'Prescriptive grammar note', containing warnings about parts of the language where prescriptive manuals often get things wrong, using the label 'incorrect' (or 'not strictly correct') for usage that is perfectly grammatical, though perhaps informal in style.

3 Grammatical terms and definitions

Describing complex systems of any kind (car engines, legal codes, symphonies, languages) calls for theoretical concepts and technical terms ('gasket', 'tort', 'crescendo', 'adverb'). We introduce a fair amount of grammatical terminology in this book. To start with, we will often need to employ the standard terms for

⁴ From B. A. Phythian, *A Concise Dictionary of Correct English* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979).

three different areas within the study of language. Two of them have to do with the grammatical **form** of sentences:

syntax is the study of the principles governing how words can be assembled into sentences (*I found an unopened bottle of wine* is admissible but **I found a bottle unopened of wine* is not); and

morphology deals with the internal form of words (*unopened* has the parts *un-*, *open*, and *-ed*, and those parts cannot be combined in any other order).⁵

But in addition to their form, expressions in natural languages also have **meaning**, and that is the province of the third area of study: **semantics**. This deals with the principles by which sentences are associated with their literal meanings. So the fact that *unopened* is the opposite of *opened*, and the fact that we correctly use the phrase *an unopened bottle of wine* only for a bottle that contains wine and has not been opened, are semantic facts about that expression.

We will need a lot of more specific terms too. You may already know terms like **noun**, **verb**, **pronoun**, **subject**, **object**, **tense**, and so on; but we do not ASSUME any understanding of these terms, and will devote just as much attention to explaining them as to other terms that you are less likely to have encountered before. One reason for this is that the definitions of grammatical terms given in dictionaries and textbooks are often highly unsatisfactory. This is worth illustrating in detail, so let's look at the definitions for two specific examples: the term **past tense** and the term **imperative**.

Past tense

The term 'past tense' refers to a grammatical category associated with verbs: *likes* is a present tense form and *liked* is a past tense form. The usual definition found in grammar books and dictionaries says simply that the past tense expresses or indicates a time that is in the past. But things are nothing like as straightforward as that. The relation between the GRAMMATICAL category of past tense and the SEMANTIC property of making reference to past time is much more subtle. Let's look at the following examples (the verbs we need to compare are underlined):

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| [4] | DEFINITION WORKS | DEFINITION FAILS |
| i | a. <i>The course <u>started</u> last week.</i> | b. <i>I thought the course <u>started</u> next week.</i> |
| ii | a. <i>If he <u>said</u> that, he was wrong.</i> | b. <i>If he <u>said</u> that, she wouldn't believe him.</i> |
| iii | a. <i>I <u>offended</u> the Smiths.</i> | b. <i>I regret <u>offending</u> the Smiths.</i> |

The usual definition works for the [a] examples, but it completely fails for the [b] ones.

In [i] the past tense *started* in the [a] case does locate the starting in past time, but in [b] the same past tense form indicates a (possible) starting time in the future. So not every past tense involves a past time reference.

⁵ The decimal point of *un-* and *-ed* is used to mark an element smaller than a full word.