

Proper English: Rhetoric or Reality

KATE BURRIDGE

Monash University

The term Standard English is widely used and at first blush its meaning seems straight-forward. Standard English refers to a set of practices that claims to excel all others in quality. It is linguistic 'best practice'. Yet a precise definition is difficult. As a linguistic label Standard English is hopelessly inexact and carries so much associated baggage that its meaning seems to change every time it makes an appearance. So what is Standard English? Who is responsible for it? Who speaks it? Is it even real or is it more an illusion — a kind of linguistic will-o'-the-wisp or Jack-o'-lantern on the path of English language history? And what does this mean for those whose business is English language — copy editors, writers of style books and usage manuals, authors, journalists, dictionary makers, linguists, educators and teachers of English to second language learners.

Introduction

Standard English *noun* **1.** that form of written English characterised by the spelling, syntax, and morphology which educated writers of all English dialects adopt with only minor variation. **2.** (loosely) **a.** the pronunciation of educated speakers of the dialect of south-eastern England. **b.** the pronunciation of the educated speakers of other dialects of English which resemble it. **3.** those English words and phrases which in a dictionary do not have limiting labels as *Colloquial, Obsolete, etc.* [*The Macquarie Dictionary* 1997]

Most of us know what Standard English is; yet it is one of those linguistic terms that is notoriously difficult to define. Almost every publication dealing with English has some reference to the Standard but the meaning of the term seems to change every time it makes an appearance. Even how to write it varies — should that be Standard English or standard English? It depends on your point of view.

On the basis of the plethora of descriptions that have appeared over the years it is possible to isolate at least five features that set Standard English apart from its non standard relatives:

- Standard English is the language of educated English-speaking people.
- It has been codified in dictionaries and grammars.

- It is a variety without a home.
- It is more easily recognisable in writing.
- It is a variety involving vocabulary and grammar but can be spoken with any accent.

Standard English has also been described as a ‘polycentric’ dialect — English, American, Scottish, Australian and other varieties all differ slightly from one another (Trudgill 1992:70-71). Until quite recently Australia based its standard on the British Standard (i.e. the standard variety of England). Even today there are still many who defer to British norms, as opposed to Australian usage, although the appearance of style manuals like *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* and distinctly Australian dictionaries, such as those published by Macquarie and Oxford, are helping to establish a distinctive standard for Australia. Collins and Peters (forthcoming) make comparisons with New Zealand English and the two northern hemisphere standards and examine the extent to which Australian English is now “consolidating its own norms as an independent national standard”.

Standard English - Best Practice?

best practice *noun* the set of operations achieving world-class results in quality and customer service, flexibility, timeliness, innovations, cost, and competitiveness, especially from the cooperation of management and employees in all key processes of the business. [*Macquarie Dictionary 1997*]

Standard languages represent a kind of linguistic ‘best practice’ — a set of behaviours that claims to excel all others. Correctness, precision, purity, elegance are the qualities of the perceived standard. It is the measure of excellence — the ‘benchmark’, if you like, against which all other varieties of the language are gauged. Standard English is promoted in schools and used in law courts and government institutions; students are expected to use it in essays; broadcasters are expected to speak it on radio; ESL instructors are expected to teach it to foreign language learners. Speakers are supposed to acquire the standard rules and those that do not are in danger of being regarded as recalcitrant, lazy and incompetent. They are said to have poor grammar — or worse no grammar at all.

This variety is even referred to as ‘the standard language’ not ‘the standard dialect’. Since dialects are held to be substandard varieties of a language — varieties not quite up to scratch — the label ‘standard dialect’ would seem a kind of self-contradiction. For many Standard English is English. What they think of as the rules of English grammar are the rules of this one variety — more especially its written form. Even

words do not seem real until they appear in a dictionary. Speakers will often ask whether something they have heard, or even used themselves, is an actual word or not. Use is not enough to qualify something as language.

The 'Standard' — Ideal or Real?

'That the weather clerk really makes the weather probably none but infants believe, but that language is made by compilers of dictionaries and grammars is a conception not confined to the young or ignorant'. [Hans von Jagemann, presidential address to the Modern Language Association in 1899; cited in Wardhaugh 1999:99]

Standard English is a variety of English that has been artificially created over many years, not by any English Language Academy, but by a network of different groups, including writers of style guides and usage manuals, dictionary makers, editors, teachers, newspaper columnists. Their cleaning-up activities have amassed over the years an arsenal of prescriptive texts that promote and also legitimise a single fixed and approved variety (see Milroy 2002 on the legitimisation of the Standard). These dictionaries, grammars and handbooks record, regulate, tidy up and iron out. Their neat lists, elegant definitions and fine-spun paradigms necessarily ignore the diversity and variability that is part and parcel of any language system. Even histories of the language prop up the linguistic fiction by ignoring this richness. Apart from occasional lip-service to regional differences, historical accounts of English have focused overwhelmingly on the making of the present-day standard. The story of the achievements of one variety has become the story of our language. (See Watts and Trudgill 2002 for alternative histories).

Prescriptive practices have left Standard English regularised and homogenised — a kind of linguistic monolith with a fixed set of strict rules and conventions that now defines 'best practice'. It is an ideal we have for our language and everyday usage will never quite measure up — even the performances of 'good' speakers and writers. Indeed, the creators of the Standard themselves do not always observe their own prescriptions. Take the recommendations of one of the first codifiers Bishop Lowth. His *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) clearly outlined that strong verbs like write and ride should distinguish between past tense and past participle forms. Lowth provided lists of what he described as common mistakes committed even by 'some of our best Writers':

He begun, for he began; he run, for he ran; he drunk, for he drank: The Participle being used instead of the Past Time. And much more frequently the Past

Time instead of the Participle: as, *I had wrote, it was wrote*, for *I had written, it was written*; *I have drank*, for *I have drunk*; *bore*, for *born*; *chose*, for *chosen*; *bid*, for *bidden*; *got* for *gotten* &c. This abuse has been long growing upon us, and is continually making further incroachments (1762: 85-89).

In his own private correspondence, however, Robert Lowth constantly flouted this grammatical rule. In a letter to his wife he states ‘My Last was wrote in a great hurry’ and later in the same letter ‘whose faces and names I have forgot’ (cited in Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2002: 463). Yet Lowth clearly believed that preterite and participle strong verb forms should be kept distinct. In this case Lowth’s preferred practice was clearly not best practice. So what is going on here?

In his grammar Lowth made it clear that the set of rules he was laying down belonged to a more abstract level of language to be distinguished from actual usage or ‘common discourse’ as he described it. In his preface he wrote: ‘It is not owing then to any peculiar irregularity or difficulty of our Language, that the general practice both of speaking and writing it is chargeable with inaccuracy. It is not the Language, but the practice, that is in fault’ (1762: v-vi). What Lowth and others were busy cultivating was a linguistic fantasy. Perhaps it would be more accurate if we acknowledged its otherworldliness and called it something else — the ‘Superstandard’, for example. (See Wolfram and Fasold 1974 for a discussion of ‘superstandard forms’ of language).

The standardisation process necessarily involves removing variation. There is no room for linguistic options. Take Lowth’s example again. Strong verbs since the beginning of the medieval period have ‘confused’ past tense and past participle forms; as Lass (1999) shows, complexity and variance in this area of the grammar has been rife for centuries. Lowth (and other codifiers) condemned the confusion and ironed it out. Lowth’s grammatical rule now makes it possible to put a tick or a cross beside any strong verb form. Speakers cannot vacillate between begun and began — one choice only has the stamp of approval. But real language is not an absolute matter of putting a tick or a cross beside it. It is much more complicated and far more interesting than that. Indeed, the standard forms Lowth recommended were not what he chose for the private letters to his wife. It is hard to know what motivated his choices here. Perhaps they were too formal for his intimate correspondence. He might not have even been aware of the contradiction. Prescriptive endeavours necessarily promote mental dishonesty — either self-deception or full-blown hypocrisy. Language is simply not amenable to being forced into perfect standard moulds and anyone who attempts to do so will find themselves in contradiction. These differences between strong verb forms continue today — and the variants still give off clear social signals.

Why doesn't everyone speak 'properly'?

Language has two distinct functions. Its primary, or orthodox function, is to facilitate communication. The other is to promote identity, or in-group solidarity, to preserve a group's uniqueness or to establish its presence. The importance of this second function should never be underestimated. Language is a potent symbol of a bewildering array of different affiliations, including ethnicity, sex, race, sexual preference, religion, generation, abilities, appearance, profession. We wear aspects of accent, vocabulary, grammar like we do emblems on a T-shirt — they define the gang.

It is risky for speakers to alter aspects of their linguistic behaviour. For one, it means giving up their allegiances to their social group — turning their back on the values, aspirations and accomplishments of those people they most closely identify with. It also means adopting symbols of another group and they run the risk of never being a proficient enough speaker to ever be accepted there, either. Moreover, it's not a simple matter of one group having more prestige than another. Certainly varieties like the standard are associated with power, education and wealth. And these things are, of course, highly valued by many people. Such varieties are said to have overt prestige. But as sociolinguists have shown, 'bad language' can have a prestige all of its own, a covert or hidden prestige (Andersson and Trudgill 1990). As attitude studies show, so-called low or powerless speech styles win out when it comes to more human qualities like integrity, social attractiveness and friendliness. Nonstandard usage can also have a macho value for men. What we have here is a constant tug-of-love between the overt prestige of the high status groups, symbolically the wider community, versus the covert prestige of the local, non-prestige groups.

Even so-called 'good speakers', those whose language comes closest to 'best practice', would find some of the features demanded by the Standard unacceptable — as Bishop Lowth did — for the simple reason they are too correct. Constructions like *Whom did you see at the party* and *The data are misleading* are too 'highfalutin' for many speakers (even for more formal occasions). This is increasingly the case. Put simply, talking 'posh' doesn't have the same prestige it once had. All over the English-speaking world, growing egalitarianism and social democracy is seeing the solidarity function of dialects and accents gaining over the status function. Many people are now trying to speak more 'down-to-earth', wishing to avoid the 'crème de la crème' connotations of the Standard (or 'Superstandard') and its associated accents. Certainly in Australia it is not uncommon to encounter hostile (or amused) reactions towards these more prestigious varieties.

Clearly, speech communities are extremely complex and language has to cover a

huge range of social behaviour. Yet, variability and mutability — qualities intrinsic to any linguistic system — do not sit happily within the classifications of a ‘pure’ and consistent standard variety. The label ‘standard’ entails not only ‘best practice’ but also ‘uniform practice’. This is only practical in the context of the written language, more especially formal written language. The writing process (and the conscious self-censorship that accompanies it) has a straitjacketing effect that safeguards the language to some extent from ‘the boundless chaos of a living speech’, as Samuel Johnson put it in the preface to his dictionary — in other words, the flux and variance that is the reality of language.

In a sense, it is society’s dependence on and veneration for the written word that blinds speakers to this reality. That writing should hold such a privileged position is understandable. Much of its prestige comes from its rich literary tradition. The standardisation process has also put it up there with those other ossified paragons of linguistic virtue — the written classical languages such as Latin and Greek. But on a more practical level, it’s only quite recently that we have really been able to study speech. Recording is a modern phenomenon — previously no one had proper access to live unsolicited speech. The legacy of this is that until quite recently even the activities of linguists concentrated on the structures of the planned and highly standardised language found in written texts. It is hardly surprising, then, that our dictionaries and usage books have placed so much emphasis on the written word and that writing has been held up as the model for correctness. When the Watergate Tapes were first transcribed and reproduced in the papers, the American public was horrified — how could they have elected people who cannot produce a decent grammatical sentence? (Jim Miller, pers. com.) This was spontaneous speech, of course, where the concept of “sentence” is simply not appropriate. But the written tail now wags the spoken dog and the rules that pertain to writing are what speakers think of as ‘the rules of English grammar’.

Language doesn’t stand still

‘The English language is like a fleet of juggernaut trucks that goes on regardless. No form of linguistic engineering and no amount of linguistic legislation will prevent the cycles of change that lie ahead’ (Robert Burchfield 1985:173)

But even in writing we can never achieve total homogeneity. For one, language is always changing. Change is also glacially slow and it takes a while before any new usage is totally accepted. For example, a construction like *usedn’t* is frequent in speech and writing of many educated Australians; yet it still hovers on the border between standard and non-standard. There is also disagreement between speakers.

Some claim to say I usedn't to. Some claim to say I didn't used to. The rest are fence sitters as to which they feel is more acceptable. The 'boundless chaos of living speech' cannot be overlooked. Even Samuel Johnson recognised as soon as he had produced his dictionary the futility of trying to 'ascertain' or 'fix the language'. Centuries later Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary at the time, also realised the impossibility of stopping linguistic change. As he pointed out, no amount of linguistic intervention can prevent it. Vocabulary is particularly unstable and dictionary makers like Burchfield are constantly having to redraw the admission/exclusion boundary for marginal vocabulary items. Yeah-no is a new discourse marker in English — when will it appear in our dictionaries? Even more of a headache for lexicographers are meanings. For most Australians a couple means 'a few'. When will the Macquarie Dictionary acknowledge this meaning? But it's not just vocabulary that shifts. All aspects of the linguistic system are constantly on the move. Dictionaries and handbooks must stay current. And here is a fine example of human capacity for doublethink when it comes to language. Many fine dictionaries like Funk and Wagnells have dropped by the wayside because they did not update (see Stockwell and Minkova 2001:191-92). People simply stopped using them. And yet if the dictionary makers and handbook writers do acknowledge current usage, there are howls about declining educational standards. Some time ago I suggested publicly that English would be better off if it abandoned the apostrophe to signal possession and retained it only for its other functions. As you see from a sample letter below, the idea was not met with wild enthusiasm.

How disappointing it is that those who direct the nature and structure of our language should be so accepting of outright errors and misuse of our language. First John Hajek, Melbourne University, and now Kate Burridge (Burrage?) of Latrobe. I should like to know why the misused and incorrect English of the ignorant, the ill-informed, the apathetic and the lazy should be acceptable? If this continues we shall have no formal structure of our language: it will become unteachable, unintelligible, and eventually, useless as an accurate means of communication. Can you imagine the French, the Italians, the Germans allowing gross abuse being acceptable to their academics. (Malcolm Whiffin, 21 March 1996)

I could never have predicted the furious letters and emails that followed. Such passionate support for a piece of punctuation we imported from the French nearly 500 years ago!

It is not just the 'craft professionals' (as Cameron describes them; 1995: Ch.2) who

watch over the Standard. English-speaking communities are full of self-appointed guardians of the language, arbiters of linguistic goodness ever on the lookout for language crimes — a mispronunciation, a misplaced apostrophe, an incorrect word, a split infinitive. Lists of linguistic atrocities appear regularly in indignant letters to newspapers with titles such as ‘Lamentable Language’ (Green Guide November 9, 2000). Of course by the time ‘errors’ are attracting attention in this way, it usually means there is already a sizeable portion of the speech community using them (even Standard English speakers). Take for instance the current collision in Antipodean English of the two verbs bring and buy — increasingly bought is appearing as the past of bring. These are early days, but the fact that bought now commonly appears in print as the past of bring suggests the change is well and truly entrenched. Yet it would be a brave editor who takes this new usage on board. Of course no one cares these days that go has filched its past tense went from wend or that to be is a linguistic mongrel comprising verb forms from three perhaps even four other verbs. So when will Standard English embrace the mixed pedigree of bring?

Here is more linguistic doublethink. Most people seem fascinated by word origins and the stories that lie behind the structures in their language. Why then such squeamishness when it comes to the changes happening in their lifetime? The fact that go has stolen its past tense from another verb is interesting — but that bring is doing likewise is calamitous. Change is only acceptable if it remains well and truly in the past. Speakers have always been this way. Slang is a perfect illustration. Early dictionaries, particularly their entries labelled unfit for general use, reveal that slang expressions either intrude into neutral style and make it into standard usage or they drop by the wayside. In Samuel Johnson’s dictionary of 1755, for example, we find descriptions such as: abominably “low”, nowadays “barbarous”, clever “a low word”, bamboozle “cant” [= jargon, especially criminal]. A lot of his entries were clearly slang of the time; it’s just that the term slang wasn’t available to Johnson, at least in its current meaning.

Linguistic judgements have little to do with the language, but what is at stake socially. The significance of usage always derives from its cultural and social setting and speakers’ dislike of certain words, pronunciations and grammar arises accordingly. This places the craft professionals in an impossible position. Speakers clearly believe in the idea of linguistic perfection. They believe a language should be uniform and consistent. And they want their reference books to tell them what is and what is not correct usage. Dictionaries and handbooks that acknowledge change are abdicating their responsibility. So too are the style manuals that recognise options.

Linguists are also in a difficult position here. In the eyes of many they are very much a part of the permissive ethos that is behind the perceived decline and continued abuse of English. Yet, linguists study language in the same way that botanists study plants. Clearly, they cannot disparage native speakers for dropping an *l* in vulnerable or condemn as ‘linguistic atrocities’ expressions like *youse* any more than botanists can denigrate those species in the plant world the wider community views as weeds. Linguistic science tells us that dropping an *l* in *vulnerable* is no different from losing the *l* in *walk* or *calm*. These sorts of reductions are a part of natural sound change. Linguists will also point out that *you* is historically plural, contrasting with singular *thou*. When social changes saw the disappearance of *thou*, *you* took over and dialects have been evolving new plural pronouns like *youse*, *you-all* and *you-uns* ever since. Linguists will argue all constructions are equally good and that change and variation are natural and inevitable features of any thriving language — but the general community think otherwise. For them there is a very obvious distinction between the unwanted plants in the linguistic garden and those that should be promoted. Clearly, both parties approach language very differently. For linguists, it is a natural phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts. For others, it is more an art form, something to be cherished and preserved — understandably these people reject the neutral stance of the linguistics profession.

Grammatical cleanliness is next to godliness

‘It is just common sense that people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in their society and to employ it in many formal settings’ (Pinker 1994:400)

So where does this leave those whose business is the teaching of English? We all make value judgements on language. As Cameron (1995) argues, ‘verbal hygiene’ is an integral part of our linguistic behaviour, as basic as vowels and consonants. A sense of linguistic values is built into our social structure and it has always been this way. So rules in language are inevitable. But not all rules are good rules.

Take the example of the notorious *lay-lie* rule. This would have disappeared long ago if it hadn’t been kept alive by linguistic life-support systems like Harry Blamires’ *The Queen’s English*. Books like these condemn examples like ‘If you lay down with dogs, you get up with fleas’ (to quote an example I encountered recently) as ‘incorrect’, ‘dialectal’ or ‘illiterate’. According to linguistic inspectors like Harry Blamires, it shows a failure to master the feature of ‘transitivity’. Transitive verbs involve actions transferring across to some other entity. *Lay* is transitive: hens lay eggs. *Lie* is intransitive: you can’t lie anything. So, ‘to lay down with dogs’ instead of ‘to lie

down with dogs' is a misuse of this basic feature of transitivity. In fact, many English verbs are both transitive and intransitive — yet no one condemns these.

Let me briefly outline some the problems of the lay-lie rule. These two verbs lay and lie share forms. The past of lie is lay. The verb lie also has a whole host of different meanings including 'to fib'. So speakers need to add down if they mean 'to assume a recumbent position' — 'If you lie down with dogs'. Problems occur if this is put into the past. It becomes 'If you lay down with dogs'. In normal fast speech the 'd' of down transfers to the end of lay, producing 'layd'. So really is it any wonder that speakers confuse the verbs and arrive at 'If you lay down with dogs'. The basic units of language are distinctive sounds and words and for effective communication they must be kept distinctive. Lay-lie fails in this requirement. As Dwight Bolinger (1980: 168) also concludes, the price of maintaining this rule is just too high.

Yet, because of the way our society operates, rules like this one continue to matter. They become shibboleths, or social passwords — the more impractical, the more difficult the better. To master the lay-lie distinction takes time, effort, proper schooling. If you have survived all this, you are not going give up the rule easily. For many people, it is not so much cleanliness that is next to godliness, as good grammar — and good grammar means knowing the distinction between lay and lie. Despite our current era of equal opportunity and equality for all, many are still discriminated against for using non-standard dialects and low-status accents. Sentences like 'If you lay down with dogs, you will get up with fleas' can place people at a disadvantage. Even my apparently 'laid-back-anything-goes' first year students frequently come out with outrageous statements about other people's language. Linguistic prejudices never seem to be challenged.

Urges to cultivate and tidy up the language are clearly part and parcel of the solidarity and separating function of language. And it is clearly about social status. Teachers must therefore continue to give students access to these rules. If they then choose to break them, so be it, but this should come from a position of knowledge not from ignorance. However, let us not put the prescriptive cart before the usage horse. Many of the rules handed down are impractical, unjust and often simply wrong-headed. They do not allow for language change. They do not allow for stylistic variation. Many have been artificial from the start, stemming from a time when regulating English meant making it look more like Latin. Rules are inevitable, yes, but they should be sensible.

CONCLUSION

‘Language must take its place alongside diet, traffic safety, and the cost of living as something that everyone thinks about and talks about’ (Bolinger 1980:188)

The title of this paper poses the question: ‘Proper English: rhetoric or reality’. The answer — it is probably obvious — depends on your point of view. I recall when a new style guide for journalists appeared on the scene. In a discussion on radio with the writer, Kim Lockwood, I suggested that the rules he outlined were not cut-and-dried and that he should have guided his readers through the range of available options. Some rules, I argued, were no longer valid and should be dispensed with. One frustrated talkback caller summed me up — ‘She doesn’t get it, does she?’. And the caller was right. There is a sense in which we linguists definitely don’t get it. Speakers of English believe in a standard language. They believe in, if not the existence, then the possibility of a single correct language system. And such beliefs are powerful — as anyone who has tried to mess with the cherished standard knows. And yet we are going to have to mess with this cherished standard if we are to develop a better and more constructive public discourse on language.

People’s concerns about the well-being of their language have always brought to my mind a picture of English as some sort of garden that, if not carefully and constantly tended, quickly becomes unruly and overgrown (Burridge 2002; in press). Standard languages and gardens have much in common. Both are human constructions and they share two fundamental characteristics — they are restricted by boundaries and they are also cultivated. Yet, to create a standard language or to build a garden is to enter into a partnership with natural processes. Neither languages nor gardens are ever finished products.

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Kate Burridge completed her undergraduate training in Linguistics and German at the University of Western Australia. In February 2003 she took up the Chair in Linguistics at Monash University. Her main areas of research are: grammatical change in Germanic languages; the Pennsylvania German spoken by Anabaptist communities in Canada; the notion of linguistic taboo; the structure and history of English.