

The standard language myth

I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact.

Lévi-Strauss (1964)

It should be clear by now why linguists consider the idea of a spoken standardized language to be a hypothetical construct. In his survey of the evolution of the concept of a standard, Crowley (2003) uses the term *idealized language*, which captures the sense of an honorable and rightful perfection.

Not much has changed since Jonathan Swift wrote his "A proposal for correcting, improving and ascertaining the English tongue" (1712). Those who take it upon themselves to protect English from its speakers are still quite sure of their right to do so. James Kilpatrick is a modern-day example of someone who brings tremendous emotion and more than a little melodrama to what he clearly sees as a battle for the one true English:

The lexicographer's job is to distill the grapes of usage at the different levels. Thus, "he doesn't go there anymore" conveys the same information that is transmitted by "he don't go there no more," but the one is standard American English and the other is not.

Is the one "inferior" to the other? Of course. Who says so? This is the silent, common judgment of writers, editors, teachers and prescriptive lexicographers. The setting of standards in language is a contentious business, but somebody has to do it. Without standards, without definitions, without structural law, we lapse into linguistic anarchy. (Kilpatrick 1999)

Google searches provide a sense of how large these issues loom in the minds of people more generally (Table 4.1). A survey of discussions on the topic of grammar brings up hundreds of examples. A large portion of them have not to do with grammar in the way it has been defined here, but with matters of punctuation. No matter the topic, the tone can be affronted, sarcastic, condescending, servile and, on occasion, silly to the point of absurdity as in an unattributed adaptation of a Nazi poster originally designed for posting in Holland (Figure 4.1).

Table 4.1 Number of Google hits for grammar terms

<i>Google term search</i>	<i>No. hits early October 2009</i>
"bad grammar"	8,410,000
"grammar advice"	6,630,000
"English grammar errors"	5,050,000



Figure 4.1 Bad grammar destroys nations

The idea of a standard language is constructed and re-constructed on an on-going basis by those who have a vested interest in the concept. At this juncture, it is necessary to consider in some detail exactly what this mythical beast called U.S. English is supposed to be.

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Standard (American) English

Non-linguists¹ are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, so much so that the average person is very willing to describe and define it, much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn, or describe a being from *Star Trek*'s planet Vulcan, or tell us who King Arthur was and why he needed a Round Table. For the most part people will undertake describing any of these even though they know that the thing they are describing is imaginary. That is, your description of a unicorn would be a great deal like everybody else's, because the concept of a unicorn is a part of our shared cultural heritage. You picked up your mental image (a horse with a single pointed horn growing from its forehead) someplace along the line; most probably you don't remember when or where.

The same is true for what has been called, to this point, Standard American English. A comparison of published definitions for this term reveals some common themes. From *Pocket Fowler's Modern English Usage*:

Standard American English. The term has been variously defined and heavily politicized, but essentially it is the form of English that is most widely accepted and understood in an English-speaking country and tends to be based on the educated speech of a particular area . . . It is used in newspapers and broadcasting and is the form normally taught to learners of English.

A more recent definition from *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (2009), which proclaims itself *The Voice of Authority*:

Standard American English: the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.²

Both definitions assume that the written and spoken language are equal, both in terms of how they are used, and how they should be used. *Merriam-Webster* sets spelling and pronunciation on common footing, and compounds this error by bringing in both formal and informal language use.

While the definitions make some room for regional differences, they make none at all for social ones, and in fact, it is quite definite about the social construction of the hypothetical standard: it is the language of the educated.

What is meant by "educated" is left unstated and neither are the implications explored anywhere else in the dictionary. People who are not educated – whoever they may be – are drawn into the definition by its final component: "Standard American English is acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood." The lexicographer assumes that those with lesser education will bow to the authority of those with more education, because that is what we are trained to do.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary's (2009) definition is more succinct, but it also draws on the idea of educated people as the source of acceptable English: "[The] language described as standard is the form of that language which is considered acceptable and correct by most educated users of it: Most announcers on the BBC speak Standard British English."



More specific information on exactly how the lexicographer draws on the language of the educated is provided by interviews with the pronunciation editor at *Merriam-Webster*, which followed from the dictionary's tenth edition. It falls to the pronunciation editor to decide which possible pronunciations are included in the dictionary, and how they are ordered. "Usage dictates acceptability," he is reported as saying. "There is no other non-arbitrary way to decide" (Nemy 1993).

In order to pin down usage, the editor listens to "talk shows, medical shows, interviews, news, commentary, the weather" (ibid.) on the radio and on television. The editorial preface to the dictionary is more specific about this procedure; the list of those who are consulted about pronunciation includes politicians, professors, curators, artists, musicians, doctors, engineers, preachers, activists, and journalists:

In truth, though, there can be no objective standard for correct pronunciation other than the usage of thoughtful and, in particular, educated speakers of English. Among such speakers one hears much variation in pronunciation . . . [our attempt is to] include all variants of a word that are used by educated speakers.

(*Merriam-Webster* 2009: 83)

The editors claim an objective standard (the language of the educated) and at the same time they acknowledge variation among educated speakers. This apparent inconsistency is resolved by the policy which includes *all variants* that are used by educated speakers. A close look at the pronunciations listed in the dictionary, however, indicates that this cannot be the case. An entry with three or more possible pronunciations is rare. If *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* truly intends to include all pronunciations of the educated, then this definition of educated must be very narrow.

The goal is to be representative, but how do the editors of the dictionary go about gathering a representative sample? If the primary source of data comes from broadcast media, then the sample is very shallow indeed. How many people appear regularly in a forum which is broadcast to a wider audience? The lesser educated, who by the dictionary definition must constitute the greatest number of native speakers of English, are rarely heard from.

Maybe there is no way to compile a dictionary which is truly descriptive in terms of pronunciation; maybe it is necessary to choose one social group to serve as a model. Perhaps there is even some rationale for using those with more education as this group. But there is nothing objective about this practice. It is the ordering of social groups in terms of who has authority to determine how language is best used.

The rationale for this ordering derives at least in part from the perceived superiority of the written language. Persons with more education are more exposed to the written language and literary traditions; they may, in simple terms, be better writers than those with less education. Why this should mean that their pronunciation and syntax are somehow more informed, more genuine, more authoritative – that is never made clear.

Definitions of standard language supplied by people who do not edit dictionaries for a living echo many of the themes already established, but they sometimes become very specific. According to CompuServe (1995): *SAE is . . .

- having your nouns and your verbs agree.
- the English legitimized by wide usage and certified by expert consensus, as in a dictionary usage panel.
- the proper language my mother stressed from the time I was old enough to talk.

- one that few people would call either stilted or “low,” delivered with a voice neither guttural nor strident, clearly enunciated but not priggish about it, with no one sound having a noticeably distinctive character. It is a non-regional speech but clearly and easily understood in all regions . . . Standard American English uses, in general, only one syllable per enunciated vowel so most accents from the South and West are not to the pattern.³

These references to the authority of educational institutions and unnamed experts correspond to the dictionary definitions in a fairly predictable way. Like the dictionary definitions, the written and spoken languages are being considered as one and the same thing. What is different about these personal definitions is the willingness to identify specific grammatical and phonological points which distinguish the hypothetical standard, and a highly emotional and personal element in the definitions. People feel strongly about language and will defend it: “In extreme cases . . . the tone is quasi-religious, even apocalyptic . . . The ideological basis of the most extreme complaints . . . is authoritarian and, seemingly, transcendental” (Milroy 1999: 20).

The most extreme ideological definitions of standard language come from those who make a living promoting the concept. Writers like Edwin Newman, John Simon and James Kilpatrick have published extensively on how English should be spoken and written. They do not address the source of their authority directly; that is taken for granted. They assume you will grant them authority because they demand it, and because it has always been granted. These men, and other men and women like them, have made careers for themselves as prescriptivists because they meet a demand they created.

The social domain of the standard has been established: it is the language of the educated, in particular those who have achieved a high level of skill with the written language (the lack of logic here will be discussed later) or those who control the written or broadcast media. However, this attempt at a simple definition of *SAE begins to falter when language variation over space is added to the mix.

Dennis Preston has compiled a body of empirical studies in which he has quantified and summarized non-linguists’ beliefs about the geographic distribution of a standard language. In “Where they speak correct English,” he asked 76 young white natives of Southern Indiana to rank all 50 states as well as New York City and Washington, DC. The best English was 1, and the worst, 52. Figure 4.2 provides Preston’s visual representation of the means for the respondents’ rankings.

If a high level of education is a primary characteristic of the hypothetical *SAE, then the opinions of these college students from Indiana would seem to provide relevant information about just where that language is spoken. Preston’s analysis indicates that these informants found the most correct English in five areas: North Central (including their own speech); Mid-Atlantic (excluding New York City); New England; Colorado; and the West Coast. Standard deviations indicated that the students are most consistent in their positive evaluation in the case of Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, with their agreement decreasing as they move Eastward through Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and finally Washington, DC (which showed little consistency in ranking with a standard deviation of 15.67). The worst standard deviation is for New York City. Preston hypothesizes this has to do with conflicting stereotypes about the city: from the center of culture to the center of crime.

Most interesting perhaps is the incredibly high level of consistency in the way his subjects found a lack of correct English in the South. Mississippi ranked last in terms of



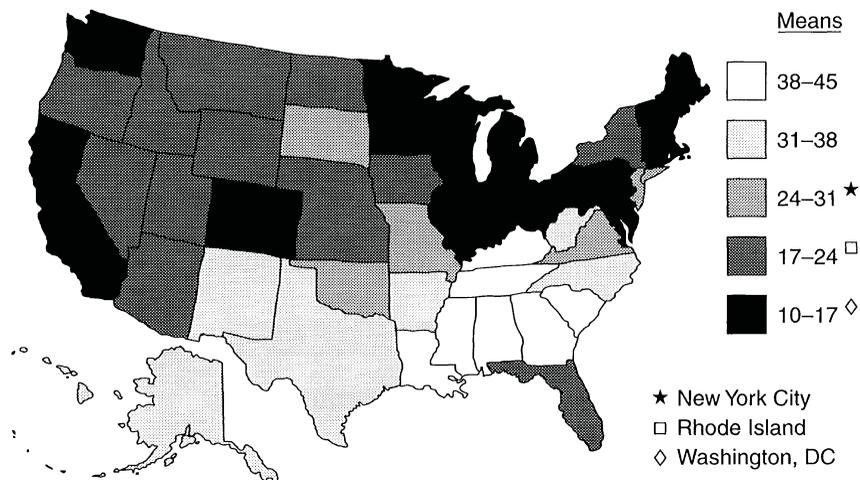


Figure 4.2 Ratings of the fifty states, New York City, and Washington, DC, for language “correctness” on a scale of 1 to 52 (lowest = “best” by seventy-six young, first- and second-year, white undergraduates from Southern Indiana)

Source: Preston (1989b: 54)

correct English and also was the most consistently ranked state. Preston takes the scores for the Southern states as “further proof of the salience of areas seen as nonstandard” (1989b: 56).

From these various definitions, a picture begins to emerge. The hypothetical Standard is the language spoken and written by persons:

- with no regional accent;
- who reside in the Midwest, Far West or perhaps some parts of the Northeast (but never in the South);
- with more than average or superior education;
- who are themselves educators or broadcasters;
- who pay attention to speech, and are not sloppy in terms of pronunciation or grammar;
- who are easily understood by all;
- who enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper in language.

It seems that we want language to be geographically neutral, because we believe that this neutrality will bring with it a greater range of communication. The assumption, of course, is that Midwest is neutral – at least, that is the way students in Indiana see it. Standard language ideology is responsible for the fact that a large percentage of students from other parts of the country agree with them.

We want language to be structured and rule-governed and clear. Something as important as language cannot be left to itself: normal people are not smart enough, not aware enough, to be in charge of their own language. There must be experts, persons in charge, structured authority. In the minds of the respondents, the areas of the country in which the hypothetical Standard is not spoken (the South, New York City), are the logical home of accent. From this assumption it follows that everybody else speaks the hypo-



thetical Standard and thus, has no accent. A native of Mississippi or Brooklyn may have exactly the same educational background, intelligence, and point to make as their counterparts in Ohio and Colorado, but many believe that the accent must compromise the quality of the performance.

This mindset is set down quite clearly in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989):

[Accent is] The mode of utterance peculiar to an individual, locality, or nation, as “he has a slight accent, a strong provincial accent, an indisputably Irish, Scotch, American, French or German accent” . . . This utterance consists mainly in a prevailing quality of tone, or in a peculiar alteration of pitch, but may include mispronunciation of vowels or consonants, misplacing of stress, and misinflection of a sentence. The locality of a speaker is generally clearly marked by this kind of accent.

The judgmental tone is quite evident even without the heavily significant choice of *mispronunciation*, *misplacing*, and *misinflection*. It follows from this definition that there is a correct regional pronunciation, but it is not explicitly identified.

From a legal perspective, Matsuda notes the similarities between the construction of the hypothetical Standard, or English without an accent, on one hand, and hidden norms codified in our legal institutions, on the other:

As feminist theorists have pointed out, everyone has a gender, but the hidden norm in law is male. As critical race theorists have pointed out, everyone has a race, but the hidden norm in law is white. In any dyadic relationship, the two ends are equidistant from each other. If the parties are equal in power, we see them as equally different from each other. When the parties are in a relationship of domination and subordination we tend to say that the dominant is normal, and the subordinate is different from normal. And so it is with accent . . . People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent.

(Matsuda 1991: 805)

The myth of standard language persists because it is carefully tended and propagated, with huge, almost universal success, so that language, the most fundamental of human socialization tools, becomes a commodity. This is the core of an ideology of standardization which empowers certain individuals and institutions to make these decisions and impose them on others.

Words about words

One very thorny problem that is not raised very often by sociolinguists is the fact that we are, as individuals and as a group, just as hampered by language ideology as the rest of the population (Bucholtz 2003; Eckert 2008; Gal 2005; Winford 2003; Wolfram 2007). This is best illustrated by the fact that most sociolinguists continue to use terms like *standard* and (worse still) *non-standard* even while they are arguing that these terms are ideological and inaccurate.⁴ Labov’s seminal paper “The Logic of Non-Standard English” (1972c), is a tour-de-force (and purposefully polemic) demonstration of the fact that the young men who speak AAVE are just as capable of constructing logical arguments (and sometimes



better at it) as young men who speak other varieties of English. In the forty years since it was first published there have been hundreds of studies that reinforce Labov's findings.

The persistence of the terms *standard* and *non-standard* among linguists is a testament to the deep roots of language ideology. This is a problem with no easy solution. Coupland summarizes:

“Standardness” and “non-standardness” are too deeply ingrained into sociolinguistic theory and methods for us to dispense with received perspectives and begin again, conceptually. Even so, there are good reasons to move on from ontological perspectives that reify, describe and account for Standard American English as a “natural” or “necessary” sociolinguistic reality.

(2002: 632)

In the first edition of this book I attempted to sidestep the use of standard and non-standard by borrowing *mainstream* as a reference to the varieties of American English which were broadly considered to be correct by prescriptivists. In the years since then, I have come to the conclusion that *mainstream* is just as inaccurate as the term *standard*. Thus in this revised edition, I will use a term which, while not perfect, is an improvement on both standard/nonstandard and mainstream/peripheral.

If you recall, syntacticians use an asterisk to mark utterances which are judged grammatically inauthentic. I am adapting that practice here, and will use *SAE to refer to that mythical beast, the idea of a homogenous, standard American English.

There is also the issue of names and labels for language varieties, race and ethnicity. The Census Bureau's terminology for race (Table 4.2) can be challenged on many levels, but it does observe the distinction between race and ethnicity. You'll note that there are no terms in this list for someone whose family originated in a Spanish-speaking country. That is because Latinos (or Hispanics – more about this below) can be and are any race.

In this volume my policy is to use those labels that people choose for themselves.⁵ In the case of Spanish-speaking Americans, the situation is far more complex in part because there are so many different cultures represented, a topic that will be discussed in Chapter 14 in more detail.

“White” as a category used by the Census Bureau is a descriptive term that does not parallel “African American” or “Asian.” European American is awkward and inexact; in Canada *Anglophone* has come to refer to their English-speaking (rather than French-speaking) population. Historically *Anglo* has to do with the Anglo-Saxons in the British Isles, but the term has gained wider usage. Here I will use Anglo, Anglo-American, and sometimes, White.

Table 4.2 U.S. Census Bureau naming conventions and alternatives

<i>Naming convention</i>	<i>Alternative</i>
White	Anglo, White
Black or African American	African American, Black
Hispanic	Latino/a*
American Indian	American Indian*
Asian	Asian*
Native Hawai'ian	Hawaiian

For the African American language community I use *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), *African American English* (AAE), or *Black English*. I will not use the term Ebonics except in quotations of work that is not my own, or in discussion of the term itself. Sclafani relates an anecdote which is an excellent illustration of the corruption of the term:

I was once lectured by a retired airline pilot at a wedding reception on the difference between African American English and Ebonics; he held that the former was a “legitimate language” and the latter was “that horrible slang you hear on cable TV.” (Sclafani 2008: 508)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- The Free Online Dictionary's (2009) definition of *SAE is interesting. How does the usage note relate to the definition? Is it complementary, or contradictory?

Standard American English: The variety of English that is generally acknowledged as the model for the speech and writing of educated speakers.

Usage note: People who invoke the term *SAE rarely make clear what they have in mind by it, and tend to slur over the inconvenient ambiguities that are inherent in the term. Sometimes it is used to denote the variety of English prescribed by traditional prescriptive norms, and in this sense it includes rules and usages that many educated speakers do not systematically conform to in their own speech or writing, such as the rules for use of who and whom. In recent years, however, the term has more often been used to distinguish the speech and writing of middle-class educated speakers from the speech of other groups and classes, which are termed nonstandard . . . Thus while the term can serve a useful descriptive purpose providing the context makes its meaning clear, it shouldn't be construed as conferring any absolute positive evaluation.

- English Plus+ (Bair 2009; <http://englishplus.com>), a website that offers resources to prepare for the SAT, provides a definition of *SAE which covers every possibility:

Standard American English, also known as Standard Written English or SWE, is the form of English most widely accepted as being clear and proper.

Publishers, writers, educators, and others have over the years developed a consensus of what *SAE consists of. It includes word choice, word order, punctuation, and spelling.

Standard American English is especially helpful when writing because it maintains a fairly uniform standard of communication which can be understood by all speakers and users of English regardless of differences in dialect, pronunciation, and usage. This is why it is sometimes called Standard Written English.

There are a few minor differences between standard usage in England and the United States, but these differences do not significantly affect communication in the English language.

Please note that most dictionaries merely report on words that are used, not on their grammar or usage. Merely because a word appears in a dictionary does not mean that it is standard.

- How does this definition compare to the others quoted in this chapter? How is it different? Consider the last paragraph especially, which strikes a very different tone. The author seems to be challenging the authority of dictionaries. Why might that be?
- Consider these two statements:

The fact that a word appears in a dictionary means ____.

The fact that a word does not appear in a dictionary means ____.

Can you come up with clear, consistent and factually accurate ways to finish these thoughts? If not, why not?

- In this book I use *SAE to refer to the concept of a standardized, idealized American English. How does this term fit, or fail to fit? Can you come up with a better solution?

Notes

- 1 Sociolinguists are still debating the parameters of such crucial terms as prestige, education, and standard: “Other[s] might share my sense of institutional frustration at how far sociolinguistics is from being able to present a consistent and persuasive set of principles and perspectives on [*SAE]” (Coupland 2000: 623). See also Milroy (2004a) for a discussion of the importance of resolving these very basic matters.
- 2 The equivalent variety of British English will be referenced as *SBE.
- 3 These definitions were answers to queries posted to various CompuServe discussion forums in summer 1995 requesting personal definitions of *SAE. Answers came from adults in all parts of the country who provided answers with the knowledge that they would be used here in whole or part.
- 4 A parallel challenge has to do with how we think about and define race. In sociology, race is not seen as a matter of genetics or biology. Race is not a thing at all, but a very complex process, the application of a set of stereotypes through institutions (Omi and Winant 1994). That is, race is a social construct, an idea that is imposed by the same institutions that promote language ideology.
 In a series of studies Baugh has approached this issue from various directions (1991, 2005, 2006a) in which he carefully teases apart the question of racial identity to the point that terms like “African American” mean very little. “It Ain’t About Race: Some Lingering (Linguistic) Consequences of the African Slave Trade and Their Relevance to Your Personal Historical Hardship Index” (2006a) is an examination of the greater sociopolitical, historical and linguistic context of race in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- 5 For example, when writing about American Indians or Native Americans, I make an attempt to identify the tribe. This raises the question: Do the Hopi have a different variety and accent of English than the Navaho or the Chippewa?

Suggested further reading

- Crowley, T. (2003) *Standard American English and the Politics of Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McWhorter, J. (1998) The Heart of the Matter. In *The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English*. New York: Plenum Trade.
- Nunberg, G. (2007) The Persistence of English. In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Shaw, S. (1999) Who Wrote Your Dictionary? Demystifying the Contents and Construction of Dictionaries. In R. Wheeler (ed.) *Language Alive in the Classroom*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Wolfram, W. and Schilling-Estes, N. (2006) Dialects, Standards and Vernaculars. In *American English: Dialects and Variation*. New York: Blackwell.