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Standard English in the World

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Models for English

The majority of ‘Outer Circle’ (Kachru 1985, 1992) speakers of English speak English as a second language: that is, they have not grown up speaking English from infancy, and they use it with people from their own country. In Outer Circle countries, there are also substantial numbers of native speakers of English, people who have learnt English from infancy. The English of the native speakers in these locations is indistinguishable from the English of highly proficient non-native speakers, and the variety of English of both is influenced by the fact of English being, or having been, a non-native language for the overwhelming majority of those who speak it. English is used in a range of domains within these countries, and by substantial numbers of citizens.

In the Inner Circle countries, enough of the population is descended from people of British Isles ancestry to ensure a variety of English that is linked to the unbroken normal transmission of English (Thomason and Kaufman 1988) down the generations, and the majority of the population are native speakers of English. The Inner Circle countries have absorbed substantial numbers of people of non-British isles ancestry who bring in new words and cultural practices, but whose presence has little effect on the general pattern of English.

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s it became accepted, first in academic circles, and then in wider society and government, that the Inner and Outer Circle settings are functionally and attitudinally similar. English belongs to its speakers in the Outer Circle, just as much as to its speakers in the Inner Circle, and all of them need to express their own culture through an English adapted to their needs, and expressive of their geographical, national, and cultural identity.

Having spent most of my adult life in Asia, and having been involved in these disputes in the Outer Circle, I was surprised to find, on my return to Europe in 1996, that the insights from the Outer Circle had not been fed into the Expanding Circle,

despite this having been raised by Kachru (1985) over ten years earlier. In the Expanding Circle English is predominantly a non-native language, used in very restricted domains (typically with foreigners), and learnt in scholastic settings. The teaching of English in mainland Europe is dominated by a monolithic model, usually based around Standard British English and RP, which may involve favouring ‘native speaker’ teachers, requiring teachers to adhere to an out-of-date and highly abstracted sense of what is correct, and penalising students for failing to use the ‘correct’ accent, typically the Daniel Jones variant of RP which is nowadays little heard. This is my fourth paper making some effort to move the teaching of English as a foreign language into the real world (Gupta 1999, 2001a, 2001b).

The work of those connected with the term “English as a Lingua Franca” (ELF) (House 1999, Seidlhofer & Jenkins 2003, Jenkins 2000, Seidlhofer & Jenkins 2003) represents a considerable effort to inject a sense of English as a World Language into EFL teaching. The thinking of the ELF group is most developed at the moment in phonology. Jenkins (2000:2) seems to accept Quirk’s notion of a ‘common core’ as analogous for grammar and lexis. Quirk’s common core, as they make clear, (Quirk et al 1972:29) did not amount to a full, teachable variety, because sometimes there is no core. For example, there is no single international work for a fast road (*motorway, highway, expressway, etc.*) or for the past participle of GET (*got* or *gotten*).

A ‘core’ is a way of imagining variation in English visually, a metaphor that might help us or might mislead. Many of the models of World English are strongly geographical. For example, Peter Strevens’s much reproduced diagram (e.g. Crystal 1997:62) creates a family tree for geographical varieties which is not entirely justifiable historically or linguistically. McArthur’s concentric model makes more sense to me (McArthur 1998:97). Its less localised standard centre works rather better than its more localised non-standard periphery: there seems to be no historical or linguistic reason to explain why Canadian English is between American and Caribbean English. It is on this centre that I would like to concentrate. Something that is being neglected in much of the World Englishes discussion at the moment is the concept of Standard English.

A fuzzy Standard

Standard English is notoriously hard to define (Trudgill 1999). The concept of Standard English is very weak indeed in speech. There are standard pronunciations of words: for example, starting *chaos*, *chutzpah* and *church* with the same sound would be

regarded as incorrect. But there is no standard accent. If speakers ask for the correct pronunciation of an unfamiliar word they map the answer onto their own accent. In all English-using places there are high-prestige and low-prestige accents: accents have high or low prestige because hearers associated their speakers with particular social groups which have high or low prestige. These systems of prestige do not operate at international level. Speakers seldom know the prestige systems of countries other than their own (I have been told by Americans that I speak just like the queen, something no British person would think!). Even within the Inner Circle, one cannot compare the prestige of accents from one country with those of accents from another: it would be ridiculous, for example, to suggest that Canada is more or less prestigious than New Zealand. Nor are all Inner Circle accents more prestigious than all Outer Circle accents: a high prestige speaker of (for example) Indian English is likely to have higher prestige all over the world than a speaker of an Inner Circle accent that is associated with low prestige and low levels of education.

All of us find it easier to understand familiar accents than unfamiliar ones. This gives rise to problems of intelligibility or comprehension between people from different places. The more localised the accent, the more likely it is to present problems to hearers from elsewhere. These are problems in inner circle varieties as well as the other two circles. The huge range of accent variation means that there is some tolerance in face to face interaction, where interlocutors with good will are prepared to exercise patience and work at comprehension. In oral mass media decisions are made about the kinds of accents that will be intelligible to a sufficiently wide audience. This is reflected in choice of reporters to fit imagined audience, and in decisions about the use of dubbing or subtitles.

In writing there is a much stronger sense of Standard English, and much less diversity. I take Standard English as a written performative: it is something writers are supposed to produce in certain contexts, and on which they will accept the possibility of correction, by spellchecks, dictionaries, and editors. I will be offended if you correct the way I pronounce the vowel of *dance* (/dans/), but I will be grateful (and possibly embarrassed) if you correct my spelling of *concensus* to *consensus*.

Part of the reason for the difficulty of definition is that Standard English is established, not by government bodies or academies, but by a loose consensus of writers. There is no central control of Standard English at either national or international levels. This has long been a part of the linguistic culture of English

(Schiffman 1996) and it is something scholars, teachers, and (quite early in the day) learners have to realise.

There is no mechanism for regulated change in English. Change comes about by mechanisms we do not fully understand. New words are not seen as an issue in English: a word can go from dialectal to standard usage in the space of months or even weeks. For example *bling* swept the world, first appearing as *bling bling*. New ideas for food and drink are especially likely to bring words into English (e.g. *macchiato*). But when it comes to spelling, English is very conservative indeed. We have a spelling system based on fourteenth century English, that was crystallised in its present form before 1700, and we have no mechanism whatever for reform. It is almost impossible for the spelling of a word to change: the handful of variants we now have (e.g. *colo(u)r hiccup/ough, dwarfs/ves*) were the variants that survived to the early nineteenth century. We do have some conventional non-standard spellings which we use in informal writing of certain types (e.g. *nite, l8, thru*), but we use these knowing them to be restricted.

So spelling follows a strict standard: there are correct and incorrect spellings, though a few words have more than one correct spelling. On the other hand, lexis is a free-for-all: new words are cheerfully welcomed. Grammar is more difficult to grasp than either orthography or lexis: there is a great deal of choice in grammar, and, all too often, there is no way of finding out whether something is standard or not.

Who writes Standard English?

Overview volumes of World English are prone, like Gramley (2001), to represent Inner Circle varieties by their standard manifestations while Outer Circle Englishes are represented by some of their more extremely non-standard manifestations. Canagarajah (this volume) says that “all communities equally despise their local varieties in deference to ‘native’ or ‘standard’ varieties (which attitude shows the power of internalized colonial values).” In fact, in both Inner and Outer Circles, Standard English (with minor variation) is expected and is used in the same kinds of domains, and in both Inner and Outer Circles there are non-standard varieties in other domains or used by some speakers, against which there are many hard words. Standard English is typically seen as ‘correct’ and ‘grammatical’, while non-standard dialects are seen as ‘wrong’ and ‘ungrammatical’, regardless of whether the speaker or the speaker’s ancestors spoke English as a native language. Disapproval of non-standard varieties is not the prerogative of the formerly colonised. The reason that Singapore has had a *Speak Good*

English Movement and India does not is that Singapore has a highly informal contact variety, usually known as Singlish, which has no real parallel in India. Standard English is not the property or prerogative of only the Inner Circle Countries, but of the whole English-using world.

Canagarajah (this volume) wonders how “we distinguish between speakers with different levels/types of competence (without invoking notions of birth, nationality, or ethnicity and without imposing non-linguistic forms of inequality)”. In practice, skill in Standard English, or lack of it, is the linguistic form of inequality that really matters. And we cannot predict that skill from birth, nationality, ethnicity or nativespeakerdom. Users of written English are judged by their skill in Standard English. Skill in Standard English is certainly not linked to native-speakerdom. To put it starkly -- without any further information to help your decision, who would you prefer to edit your writing: a non-native speaker of English who is a Professor of English at an Indian (or a Belgian) university, or a monolingual Brit who left school with no qualifications at the age of 15?

There is so much choice within Standard English that the variation from one country to another seems minor. Many years ago, in my first paper on World Englishes (Shields 1977) I discussed the widespread identification of words as local which are in what I then called ‘General English’. The practice of comparing real, attested data from an Outer (or Expanded) Circle country with abstracted, theoretical ‘Native-speaker’ English is still all too common. We can only know what Standard English is by careful verification of usage. Luckily this has become much easier since the 1990s when search engines made it possible to use the web to see what (relatively high-prestige) people all over the world were actually writing.

Standard English on the web

The web carries texts of all types. There is a full range of genres, including genres which allow for playful language, and the incorporation of a range of identity codes, something I explored in another paper (Gupta fthcg.). There are websites that include the representation of non-standard dialects, and there is also ‘leet speak’, an extreme respelling of English sometimes used in blogs. This kind of insertion of non-standard English is intentional, usually small-scale, and often flagged. For example, a search using Google threw up thousands of sites with the following, clearly non-standard strings:

She look good.

I done it.

I don't have no....

The contexts of these usages included quotations from songs, and expressions of identity (typically urban, black, and cool in these examples). Most were embedded in Standard English texts. There are many non-standard varieties used in this iconic way in a number of different genres. But the English of the web, like all written English, is predominantly standard in intent.

Because there are texts written by many kinds of people, English which is standard in intent may include features that would be corrected by an editor, and which could be regarded as incorrect in Standard English. But editors don't all agree, and we often cannot say whether an attested example is to be defined as Standard or non-Standard. This is where we need to tease out patterns of usage, to establish whether there is a geographical pattern. What we see is that many areas of fuzziness are international, while some features show complex geographical patterns.

We do not yet have established methods of sampling the web: I have established methodologies that involving using Google to search for target strings. Searches will generate a crude frequency figure that is of some interest, and the careful choice of string, combined with domain specification, can give more information. But to understand the complex patterns we need to go beyond the number of hits and read the websites. The writer of a website is not necessarily from or even in the country hosting the website, partly because people move around the world, but also because websites can be created in a remote location. Reading the website and tracking its authorship through the hierarchy of the site tells us more about the authorship, and also supplies the linguistic and cultural context of the string. In this paper, I have explored in more detail the first 50 urls generated by every string search, and can therefore give more detailed information about them, which, hopefully, will be representative of the other sites. It is not always always easy, or even possible, to establish the geographical origin of a writer, and the most likely error is that I have placed a writer in the country of residence who, unknown to me, originated in some other country. But I am fairly confident that most identifications are secure (those who come from Elven kingdoms, here, and in all tables, are classed as of unknown origin!). Websearches were made in August 2004, except where otherwise indicated.

In assessing all the figures we need to remember discrepancies in population size and in internet penetration. For example: the USA has a large population and is over-represented on the web; Nigeria has a large population but is underrepresented on the web; the UK and Singapore are also over-represented on the web, but have smaller (in the case of Singapore, very small) populations than the USA and Nigeria.

Orthography

Spelling in English is strict, but all English users know that it is being difficult to be 100% correct, and we even know what errors are likely. A strict standard, a willingness to accept correction and the expectation that people will make errors go side by side. The sort of mistakes almost everyone makes (e.g. *adress*, *comittee*, *-ant/ent*, *er/or*, *seperate*) are certainly seen as mistakes that ought to be corrected, but they do not impede intelligibility and are known to be likely in unedited work from most writers. We use a variety of techniques to eliminate them from edited text, where they would be seen as a sign of lack of care.

Even on the web, which has a mixture of edited and unedited texts, standard spellings dominate. ‘Leet speak’ is an extreme and deliberate respelling, similar to that used in SMS messaging, and gets a lot of publicity. But leet speak is actually relatively rare on the web, compared to standard spellings. For example, Google threw up only approximately 75,500 uses of *l&r*, compared with 57,700,000 uses of *later* (a ratio of 1:764). It is also instructive (and perhaps reassuring) to search for common spelling variants, of a sort that could be made by any user of English, to see what errors happen when Standard English is the target. Again, standard spellings are massively dominant (Table 1).

	No. of hits	Ratio error:correct
<i>committee</i>	<i>15,000,000</i>	
commitee	148,000	1:101
comittee	75,100	1:200
comitee	15,600	1:962
<i>accommodation</i>	<i>13,200,000</i>	
accomodation	2,300,000	1:6
accomodation	104,000	1:127
acomodation	58,900	1:224
<i>important</i>	<i>22,600,000</i>	
importent	17,400	1:1299
<i>pronunciation</i>	<i>768,000</i>	
pronounciation	73,800	1:10
<i>existence</i>	<i>7,830,000</i>	
existance	150,000	1:52
<i>pomegranate</i>	<i>166,000</i>	
pomegranite	10,900	1:15
pomigranite	162	1:1025
pomigranate	19	1:8737
pommiegranate	0	
pommiegranite	0	

Table 1: Spelling on the web (all numbers are approximate)

There is no noticeable geographical pattern for these spellings (other than the one related to variable internet penetration). Everyone can make spelling mistakes like this, and everyone is expected to try to eliminate them, but they are forgiven if they make an occasional slip-up. And, of this list, only *accomodation*, *pomegranite* and *pronounciation* are common enough to be suggested as potential alternatives to the current standard spelling. The web, like all written English, is massively standard.

Variants and Errors

I will now progress to variants that do have a geographical pattern, giving data for one variant where the USA contrasts with the rest of the world, one where it is India that is unusual, and one where it is the UK that stands out.

Alumin(i)um

Traditionally, there are said to be two norms for spelling and these are usually referred to as ‘British’ and ‘American’. Only a handful of words vary, and usually minutely, most of them being alternatives that persisted on sides of the Atlantic until the early nineteenth century. More countries follow the ‘British’ than the ‘American’ tradition, and most websites from writers based outside the USA use the ‘British’ spelling tradition. However, many traditionally ‘American’ spellings appear sporadically in regions usually associated with the ‘British’ tradition (such as *program*, *center*, *tire* and *check*).

The data for *alumin(i)um* illustrate how the American spelling, *aluminum*, dominates numerically, because of the massive representation of the USA on the web (Table 2). But this is a word that has an official spelling, *aluminium*, sanctioned by the *International Union Of Pure And Applied Chemistry*, and this is the spelling used all over the world except in the US, where only *aluminum* is used, except in explanation of the history of the word and its IUPAC name. This is one of the purest geographical spreads I have found: America is set against the rest of the world. The crude count is slightly affected by the fact that some of those who design sites about aluminium also place the spelling they do not use in the header information, thus ensuring that their site will receive hits whatever spelling is entered.

	<i>Aluminum</i>	<i>Aluminium</i>
US	33	1
UK	1	15
Rest of the world	1 (Canada)	19 (4 each from Australia & Germany, 2 each from India and Norway, 1 each from Canada, Denmark, Japan, Libya, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland)
Unclear source	6	1
Target spelling in header only	6	5
Faulty link	3	3
Not English text		6
Total hits (approx.)	8,740,000	5,880,000

Table 2: Alumin(i)um

This is the first time I-

One of the grammatical structures that has often been said to be associated with Outer Circle Countries is the use of the present continuous in contexts such as “This is the first time I -” rather than the use of the present perfective, said to be associated with Inner Circle countries (discussed in Gupta 1986). As I said 20 years ago, the use of the present continuous seems more logical, given that the perfective is so often associated with reference to past time. And, even 20 years ago, I noticed that it wasn’t absent from Inner Circle usage. The pattern of this one is complicated (Table 3). Across the web as a whole, the perfective is preferred. Both perfective and progressive are well represented in the US: if there is a subtle difference in meaning there, it is hard to understand:

- This is the first time I have submitted an application for licensure in Maryland.
- I live in the New Orleans, Louisiana area. This is the first time I am submitting an ad like this, but, what the heck.

	<i>This is the first time I have (_en)</i>	<i>This is the first time I am (_ing)</i>
US	26	14
India	0	11
UK	8	0
Rest of the world	4 (1 each from Bermuda, Canada, Sri Lanka)	10 (3 from Singapore; 1 each from Australia, Hong Kong, Malta, Pakistan, Tibet, Thailand, Turkey)
Unclear source	12	13
Not target structure		2
Total hits (approx.)	63,600	6,990

Table 3: Aspect after “This is the first time I” (first 50 hits for each)

The progressive is the most usual variant in India, and the fact that there are so many tokens from India in the first 50 sites shows how much more common this variant is in Indian English than in other Englishes.

However, the absence of progressives from the UK, and the absence of perfectives from India does not mean that the alternatives are *never* used. An advanced search for “This is the first time I am” in the domain .uk (websites hosted in the UK) generated over 100 valid examples of the progressive in the UK, including the following, from indubitably local sources (the first, which also has an unexpected form of the indefinite article, is from a national governmental website):

- This is the first time I am licensing a vehicle with a RPC; what should I do?
- This is the first time I am doing this as a teacher and i’m not sure what to expect.
- I have long been active in the wider Co-operative Movement, but this is the first time I am offering myself for election into the democratic structures of the Co-operative Group itself.

A search for “This is the first time I have” in the domain .in (websites hosted in India) produced only 3 locatable examples, including one (from the Indian Parliament) in which the reference is to past time:

- I have heard of the ‘seven-year itch’ in abortion and matrimony, but this is the first time I have heard about the seven- year itch in a governmental affair.

On this variable, the world pattern is that there is a choice between the progressive and the perfective, though the perfective is almost never used in India. India is the exception at the moment, though it may turn out that as other Outer Circle countries become better represented on the web, India will be joined by other places where the perfective is rare. India is not exceptional in its use of the progressive in this structure, but in the absence of the alternative perfective structure.

I was stood

My final example is of a structure that I predicted (more or less correctly) to be associated with British English. There are some BE + -en structure in English where the past participle can be interpreted either as a part of a passive or as deverbal adjective (e.g. BE broken). In a handful of verbs (especially SIT and STAND) the use of the -en form where the passive interpretation is not possible results in a BE + -en structure which is in variation with a BE + -ing structure. Readers from outside the UK may find this usage very wrong, and in some circles in the UK too it is stigmatised. These expressions do not seem to be currently regional within the UK, and commonly occur in national newspapers and over national radio.

	<i>I was stood in a</i>	<i>I was standing in a</i>
US	2	30
UK	32	5
Rest of the world	0	9 (3 from Canada; 2 from India; 1 each from Australia, Cyprus, Finland, Israel)
Unclear source	13	6
Passive	3	n/a
Total No. of hits (approx.)	106	6,290
<i>Hits on "I was stood/standing":</i>		
all	4,830	220,000
in domain .in	0	92
in domain .uk	1,500	10,100

Table 4: *was stood/standing*

The passives (e.g. ‘I was stood in a prominent location in my maker's booth. I was given a very high price tag.’) are easy to exclude. Examples of the target structure include:

- A mere two weeks later I was stood in a balloon basket for the first time in my life flying out of Roundhay Park in Leeds
- So much history and literature revolves around the Yukon River that I was stood in a speechless awe while I looked out over the ice.
- So, May 7th 2004 at 8AM I was standing in a regional rail station in Philadelphia and anticipating the train that would take me to Penn Station
- But here I was standing in a bar in Sydney, dog tired, watching someone who lifted my spirits to a high I couldn't have imagined ...

Nearly all uses of this structure come from the UK (Table 4). “I was stood” does occur in the US (the second example above comes from someone with presenting himself as having an unimpeachably US biography) but it is rare. In the world beyond the UK, “I was stood” is just not used in this sense. Here it is the UK that stands out

from the rest of the world. Only in the UK are there two variants, because one of those variants is used (pretty well) only in the UK.

Conclusion

In all of these structures there are variants. In many cases, it makes little sense to label variants simply as ‘standard’ or ‘non-standard’. Some (such as ‘I was stood’ and *aluminum*) function as part of the standard but only in a particular region. Others (such as the present continuous after “This is the first time”) exist as variants throughout the world. Lexis is a sponge, and grammar is very leaky indeed.

This type of identification is satisfying and reveals real patterns, showing what variants there are within standard practice, and what the geographical patterns are. Other strings I recommend for examination include:

- I wrote (to) my mother and
- The bacteria/bacterium is/are
- There is/are several
- I am/have been here since

Solutions

I hope I have convinced the readers that:

- Standard English dominates writing;
- Standard English is not predetermined: it follows the behaviour of its users;
- English orthography is strict but errors occur;
- in grammar, not everyone agrees on correctness in Standard English;
- writers sometimes deliberately write non-standard text;
- the patterns of variation in Standard English are geographically complex;
- being a native speaker does not guarantee ability to write Standard English;
- some structures that learners of English as a Foreign Language are told are wrong are used in Inner Circle Standard English texts.

How should this inform the teaching of English in Expanding Circle countries? Standard English should certainly be the focus of pedagogy, as it is in Inner and Outer Circle countries. But once learners are able to look at real texts they will encounter error and variation, and it will not be easy for them to know what is best for them to

use, and what should be avoided. They will need to know the above from quite an early stage.

Learners should be encouraged to get evidence from usage. They should be encouraged to restrict themselves to Standard English: the deliberate use of non-standard dialects requires great care. But there should not be an emphasis on areas of disputed usage. Teachers should do their best to establish what they should correct firmly, what they should correct tentatively, and what they should accept as correct. It is only by close attention to usage that this can be established.

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