

Varieties of English

Types of variation

- 1.6 There are numerous varieties of English, but we shall recognize in this book five major types of variation. Any use of the language necessarily involves variation within all five types, although for purposes of analysis we may abstract individual varieties:

- (a) region
- (b) social group
- (c) field of discourse
- (d) medium
- (e) attitude

The first two types of variation relate primarily to the language *user*. People use a regional variety because they live in a region or have once lived in that region. Similarly, people use a social variety because of their affiliation with a social group. These varieties are relatively permanent for the language user. At the same time, we should be aware that many people can communicate in more than one regional or social variety and can therefore (consciously or unconsciously) switch varieties according to the situation. And of course people move to other regions or change their social affiliations, and may then adopt a new regional or social variety.

The last three types of variation relate to language *use*. People select the varieties according to the situation and the purpose of the communication. The field of discourse relates to the activity in which they are engaged; the medium may be spoken or written, generally depending on the proximity of the participants in the communication; and the attitude expressed through language is conditioned by the relationship of the participants in the particular situation. A COMMON CORE is present in all the varieties so that, however esoteric a variety may be, it has running through it a set of grammatical and other characteristics that are present in all the others. It is this fact that justifies the application of the name 'English' to all the varieties.

Regional variation

- 1.7 Varieties according to region have a well-established label both in popular and technical use: DIALECTS. Geographical dispersion is in fact the classic basis for linguistic variation, and in the course of time, with poor communications and relative remoteness, such dispersion results in dialects becoming so distinct that we regard them as different languages. This latter stage was long ago reached with the Germanic dialects that are now Dutch, English, German, Swedish, etc, but it has not been reached (and may not necessarily ever be reached, given the modern ease and range of communication) with the dialects of English that have resulted from the regional separation of communities within the British Isles and (since the

voyages of exploration and settlement in Shakespeare's time) elsewhere in the world.

It is pointless to ask how many dialects of English there are: there are indefinitely many, depending on how detailed we wish to be in our observations. But they are of course more obviously numerous in long-settled Britain than in areas more recently settled by English speakers, such as North America or, still more recently, Australia and New Zealand. The degree of generality in our observation depends crucially upon our standpoint as well as upon our experience. An Englishman will hear an American Southerner primarily as an American, and only as a Southerner in addition if further subclassification is called for and if his experience of American English dialects enables him to make it. To an American the same speaker will be heard first as a Southerner and then (subject to similar conditions) as, say, a Virginian, and then perhaps as a Piedmont Virginian.

Social variation

- 1.8 Within each of the dialects there is considerable variation in speech according to education, socioeconomic group, and ethnic group. Some differences correlate with age and sex. Much (if not most) of the variation does not involve categorical distinctions; rather it is a matter of the frequency with which certain linguistic features are found in the groups.

There is an important polarity between uneducated and educated speech in which the former can be identified with the nonstandard regional dialect most completely and the latter moves away from regional usage to a form of English that cuts across regional boundaries. An outsider (who was not a skilled dialectologist) might not readily find a New Englander who said *see* for *saw*, a Pennsylvanian who said *seen*, and a Virginian who said *seed*. These are forms that tend to be replaced by *saw* with schooling, and in speaking to a stranger a dialect speaker would tend to use 'school' forms. On the other hand, there is no simple equation of regional and uneducated English. Just as educated English *I saw* cuts across regional boundaries, so do many features of uneducated use: a prominent example is the double negative as in *I don't want no cake*, which has been outlawed from all educated English by the prescriptive grammar tradition for over two hundred years but which continues to thrive as an emphatic form in uneducated speech wherever English is spoken.

Educated English naturally tends to be given the additional prestige of government agencies, the professions, the political parties, the press, the law court, and the pulpit – any institution which must attempt to address itself to a public beyond the smallest dialectal community. It is codified in dictionaries, grammars, and guides to usage, and it is taught in the school system at all levels. It is almost exclusively the language of printed matter. Because educated English is thus accorded implicit social and political sanction, it comes to be referred to as STANDARD ENGLISH, and provided we

remember that this does not mean an English that has been formally standardized by official action, as weights and measures are standardized, the term is useful and appropriate. In contrast with standard English, forms that are especially associated with uneducated (rather than dialectal) use are generally called NONSTANDARD.

Standard English

- 1.9 The degree of acceptance of a single standard of English throughout the world, across a multiplicity of political and social systems, is a truly remarkable phenomenon: the more so since the extent of the uniformity involved has, if anything, increased in the present century. Uniformity is greatest in orthography, which is from most viewpoints the least important type of linguistic organization. Although printing houses in all English-speaking countries retain a tiny element of individual decision (eg: *realize/realise, judgment/judgement*), there is basically a single spelling and punctuation system throughout: with two minor subsystems. The one is the subsystem with British orientation (used in most English-speaking countries other than the United States), with distinctive forms in only a small class of words, *colour, centre, levelled*, etc. The other is the American subsystem, with *color, center, leveled*, etc.

In grammar and vocabulary, standard English presents somewhat less of a monolithic character, but even so the world-wide agreement is extraordinary and – as has been suggested earlier – seems actually to be increasing under the impact of closer world communication and the spread of identical material and nonmaterial culture. The uniformity is especially close in neutral or formal styles of written English on subject matter not of obviously localized interest: in such circumstances one can frequently go on for page after page without encountering a feature which would identify the English as belonging to one of the national standards.

National standards of English

British and American English

- 1.10 What we are calling national standards should be seen as distinct from the standard English which we have been discussing and which we should think of as being supranational, embracing what is common to all. Again, as with orthography, there are two national standards that are overwhelmingly predominant both in the number of distinctive usages and in the degree to which these distinctions are institutionalized: American English <AmE> and British English <BrE>. Grammatical differences are few and the most conspicuous are known to many users of both national standards: the fact that AmE has two past participles for *get* and BrE only one, for example, and that in BrE either a singular or a plural verb may be used with a singular collective noun:

The government {^{is}_{are}} in favour of economic sanctions.

whereas in AmE a singular verb is required here.

Lexical differences are far more numerous, but many of these are familiar to users of both standards. Recent innovations tend to spread rapidly from one standard to the other. Thus while radio sets have had *valves* in BrE but *tubes* in AmE, television sets have *tubes* in both, and *transistors* and computer *software* are likewise used in both standards. Mass communication neutralizes differences; the pop music culture, in particular, uses a 'mid-Atlantic' dialect that levels differences even in pronunciation.

The United States and Britain have been separate political entities for two centuries; for generations, thousands of books have been appearing annually; there is a long tradition of publishing descriptions of both AmE and BrE. These are important factors in establishing and institutionalizing the two national standards, and in the relative absence of such conditions other national standards are both less distinct (being more open to the influence of either AmE or BrE) and less institutionalized.

One attitudinal phenomenon in the United States is of sociolinguistic interest. In affirming the students' right to their own varieties of language, many American educationalists have declared that Standard American English is a myth, some asserting the independent status (for example) of Black English. At the same time they have acknowledged the existence of a written standard dialect, sometimes termed 'Edited American English'.

Other national standards

- 1.11 Scots, with ancient national and educational institutions, is perhaps nearest to the self-confident independence of BrE and AmE, though the differences in grammar and vocabulary are rather few. On the other hand, the 'Lallans' Scots, which has some currency for literary purposes, has a highly independent set of lexical, grammatical, phonological, and orthographical conventions, all of which make it seem more like a separate language than a regional dialect.

Hiberno-English, or Irish English, may also be considered a national standard, since it is explicitly regarded as independent of BrE by educational and broadcasting services. The proximity to Britain and the pervasive influence of AmE, and similar factors mean, however, that there is little room for the assertion and development of a separate grammar and vocabulary.

Canadian English is in a similar position in relation to AmE. Close economic, social, and intellectual links along a 4,000-mile frontier have naturally caused the larger community to have an enormous influence on the smaller, not least in language. Though in many respects Canadian English follows British rather than United States practice and has a modest area of independent lexical use, in many other respects it has approximated to AmE, and in the absence of strong institutionalizing forces it would continue in this direction. However, counteracting this tendency in language as in other matters is the tendency for Canadians to

resist the influence of their powerful neighbour in their assertion of an independent national identity.

South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand are in a very different position, remote from the direct day-to-day impact of either BrE or AmE. While in orthography and grammar the South African English in educated use is virtually identical with BrE, rather considerable differences in vocabulary have developed, largely under the influence of the other official language of the country, Afrikaans.

New Zealand English is more like BrE than any other non-European variety, though it has adopted quite a number of words from the indigenous Maoris and over the past half-century has come under the powerful influence of Australia and to a considerable extent of the United States.

Australian English is undoubtedly the dominant form of English in the Antipodes and by reason of Australia's increased wealth, population, and influence in world affairs, this national standard (though still by no means fully institutionalized) is exerting an influence in the northern hemisphere, particularly in Britain. Much of what is distinctive in Australian English is confined to familiar use. This is especially so of grammatical features.

There are other regional or national variants that approximate to the status of a standard. Beside the widespread Creole in the Caribbean, for example, it is the view of many that the language of government and other agencies observes an indigenous standard that can be referred to as Caribbean English. In addition, some believe there are emerging standards in countries where English is a second language, such as India and Nigeria.

Pronunciation and standard English

- 1.12 All the variants of standard English are remarkable primarily in the tiny extent to which even the most firmly established, BrE and AmE, differ from each other in vocabulary, grammar, and orthography. Pronunciation, however, is a special case in that it distinguishes one national standard from another most immediately and completely and it links in a most obvious way the national standards to the regional varieties. In BrE, one type of pronunciation comes close to enjoying the status of 'standard': it is the accent associated with the older schools and universities of England, 'Received Pronunciation' or 'RP'. It is nonregional and enjoys prestige from the social importance of its speakers. Although RP no longer has the unique authority it had in the first half of the twentieth century, it remains the standard for teaching the British variety of English as a foreign language, as can be easily seen from dictionaries and textbooks intended for countries that teach BrE.

Varieties according to field of discourse

- 1.13 The field of discourse is the type of activity engaged in through language. A speaker has a repertoire of varieties according to field and switches to

the appropriate one as occasion demands. Typically, the switch involves nothing more than turning to the particular set of lexical items habitually used for handling the field in question: law, cookery, engineering, football. As with dialects, there are indefinitely many fields, depending on how detailed we wish our analysis to be.

Varieties according to medium

- 1.14 The differences between spoken and written English derive from two sources. One is situational: since the use of a written medium normally presupposes the absence of the person(s) addressed, writers must be far more explicit to ensure that they are understood. The second source of difference is that many of the devices we use to transmit language by speech (stress, rhythm, intonation, tempo, for example) are impossible to represent with the relatively limited repertoire of conventional orthography. In consequence, writers often have to reformulate their sentences to convey fully and successfully what they want to express within the orthographic system.

Varieties according to attitude

- 1.15 Varieties according to attitude are often called 'stylistic', but 'style' is a term which is used with several different meanings. We are concerned here with choice that depends on our attitude to the hearer (or reader), to the topic, and to the purpose of our communication. We recognize a gradient in attitude between formal (relatively stiff, cold, polite, impersonal) and informal (relatively relaxed, warm, casual, friendly). We also acknowledge that there is a neutral English bearing no obvious attitudinal colouring and it belongs to the common core of English (*cf* 1.6). We shall for the most part confine ourselves to this three-term distinction, leaving the neutral variety unmarked.

Acceptability and frequency

- 1.16 Our approach in this book is to focus on the common core that is shared by standard BrE and standard AmE. We leave unmarked any features that the two standard varieties have in common, marking as <BrE> or <AmE> only the points at which they differ. But usually we find it necessary to say <esp(ecially) BrE> or <esp(ecially) AmE>, for it is rare for a feature to be found exclusively in one variety. Similarly, we do not mark features that are neutral with respect to medium and attitude. We distinguish where necessary spoken and written language, generally using 'speaker' and 'hearer' as unmarked forms for the participants in an act of communication, but drawing on the combinations 'speaker/writer' and 'hearer/reader' when we wish to emphasize that what is said applies across

the media. We also frequently need to label features according to variation in attitude, drawing attention to those that are formal or informal.

The metaphor of the common core points to a distinction that applies to two other aspects of our description of English grammar. We distinguish between the central and the marginal also for acceptability and frequency.

Acceptability is a concept that does not apply exclusively to grammar. Native speakers may find a particular sentence unacceptable because (for example) they consider it logically absurd or because they cannot find a plausible context for its use or because it sounds clumsy or impolite. However, we are concerned only with the acceptability of forms or constructions on the grounds of their morphology or syntax.

In general, our examples are fully acceptable if they are left unmarked. But we sometimes contrast acceptable and unacceptable examples, marking the latter by placing an asterisk ‘*’ before them. If they are tending to unacceptability but are not fully unacceptable, we put a query ‘?’ before the asterisk. A query alone signifies that native speakers are unsure about the particular language feature. If native speakers differ in their reactions, we put the asterisk or query in parentheses.

Assessments by native speakers of relative acceptability largely correlate with their assessments of relative frequency. We leave unmarked those features of the language that occur frequently, drawing attention just to those that occur extremely frequently or only rarely.

In this book we offer a descriptive presentation of English grammar. We make a direct connection between forms and their meaning, conducting excursions into lexicology, semantics, and pragmatics where these impinge closely on our grammatical description.

NOTE The diamond bracket convention applies to stylistic and other variants. Phonetic symbols used in the book are those of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA); prosodic symbols are explained in 2.13–15, and abbreviations in the Index. Among other conventions: parentheses indicate optional items, curved braces free alternatives, square braces contingent alternatives (*eg* selection of the top alternative in one pair requires selection of the top one in the other).

Bibliographical note

On varieties of English, see Bailey and Görlach (1982); Biber (1988); Hughes and Trudgill (1979); Kachru (1988); McDavid (1963); Quirk (1988, 1989).

On acceptability and language attitudes, see Bolinger (1980); Greenbaum (1977, 1985, 1988); Quirk and Stein (1990).