

Evaluation of the Linguistic Features that Distinguish Standard English from Other Varieties of English

Rita Ifeyinwa Igwenagum

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Nigeria
Phone: +2348132987190
Email: maduemenkechi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the distinguishing features of Standard English from other varieties. Through a nuanced analysis of linguistic features, discourse patterns and social contexts, the study sheds light on the complex relationship between language and society. By investigating the tension between standardization and variation, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of language in shaping social relationships and highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity, thereby promoting inclusivity.

Keywords: Linguistic features, Standard English, Varieties of English

Introduction

This paper sets out to evaluate the linguistic features that distinguish Standard English from other varieties of English. Varieties stem from variation. The term “linguistic variation” covers a wide range of language variants, from the broad sense that denotes the various dialects of a language, to the narrower sense that refers to a phonological, lexical, grammatical, or syntactic feature of a dialect. The English we learn in the classroom is termed “standard English”. Standard English refers to the variety of the English language that is generally accepted as the norm for formal communication especially in education, media and official contexts. It is characterized by established grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling conventions. While not restricted to any given region, it serves as a measure for clear and effective communication across different English-speaking communities. Thus, Standard English is a socially constructed variety of English that serves as a reference point for formal communication and that is often used in situations where clarity, consistency and accuracy are required. Nevertheless, despite its prominence, there exist diverse forms of English that coexist alongside the standard variety, creating a complex linguistic environment. The Nigerian English is one of them and a product of language contact, it is a variety of the world Englishes available for use by its speech community (Akujobi, O.S. & Umoh, G.I., 2022).

Haugen (1996) identifies the process of standardization as a four-stage one:

Stage 1: Selection- an existing dialect is chosen as the one to be standardized. In the

case of English, it was the Middle English dialect of the East Midlands.

Stage 2: Elaboration- the chosen dialect is expanded and elaborated so that it can fulfil the variety of different functions it is intended to serve. That is, the dialect is added to by adding vocabulary and /or elaborating grammatical structures. In the case of English, the East Midlands dialect was elaborated by the importation of words from French and Latin and its grammatical structures elaborated by the adoption of Latinate constructions.

Stage 3: Codification- the vocabulary and grammar are made explicit and written down. Once codified in writing, then language becomes an object of consciousness in material world, in that it can be seen as well as heard, and thus “fixed” or “pinned down”. Changes to the language are thus more open to regulation and control by its community of users, especially by the more powerful sections of society.

Stage 4: Implementation- the chosen variety is implemented throughout a community, usually by becoming the language of instruction in education and being adopted by public institutions such as the law, government and the media.

Basic features of Standard English

One of the defining characteristics of standard English is its grammatical structure. Standard English adheres to a set of rules and standards that have been developed over time through language usage and consensus. It follows a subject-verb-

object word order and includes various grammatical tenses such as present, past and future. Nouns and pronouns are used to represent people, places, things, and ideas, while adjectives and adverbs describe and modify them. Prepositions are used to establish relationships between different elements in a sentence, and conjunctions connect words, phrases and clauses.

Another important feature of Standard English is its vocabulary. Standard English draws from a wide range of sources, including Germanic, Romance, and Latin languages, and has adapted and evolved over centuries. Standard English includes technical terms and jargons specific to certain fields, such as medicine, law and technology. The vocabulary of Standard English is constantly expanding and changing to accommodate new words and expressions that emerge in response to developments in society and culture as the case of the twenty-nine Nigerian English words that have been added to the English dictionary. Similarly, the internet was non-existent in my locality while I was growing up and so we did not have words associated to the internet such as email, download and so on but with technological advancement, the English vocabulary has expanded to include such words.

Standard English also has specific phonetic and pronunciation features. While there are regional variations in pronunciation, Standard English generally follows the patterns of Received Pronunciation (RP) in the United Kingdom and general American in the United States. It emphasizes the distinction between vowels and employs certain phonetic rules, such as aspiration and the pronunciation of certain consonant sounds. It is important to note that there is

no one “correct” accent or pronunciation in Standard English, as it is influenced by both geographical and social factors.

Furthermore, Standard English has a set of conventions for spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. These conventions ensure consistency and clarity in written communication. Standard English employs Roman alphabet and its twenty-six (26) letters, along with a combination of diacritical marks and symbols. It uses punctuation marks such as full stops, commas, question marks, and exclamation marks to indicate pauses, divisions, and clarifications in written texts. Capitalization rules dictate when and how to capitalize proper nouns, titles, and the beginnings of sentences.

The aforementioned features distinguish Standard English from other varieties of English and these differences shall be analyzed across the following linguistic domains: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and pragmatics with examples.

1. Phonology (Sound Patterns)

Although not limited to a single accent, Standard English excludes strong regional pronunciations. Prof. Chukwu in a phonology class (2025) noted that Standard British English (RP) is non-rhotic, unlike many regional varieties like Scottish English and some American English dialects that are rhotic. For example, Standard English will pronounce “car” as /ka:/, arm/a:m/, heart/ha:t/, girl/gɜ:l/ etc while the rhotic dialects will pronounce them with the /r/.

Also, vowel shift can mark a distinction between Standard English and other

varieties of English. A vowel shift occurs when there is a systematic change in the pronunciation of the vowel sounds of a language. The monophthongization or diphthongization of vowels in Standard English may not happen in the same way in other varieties. Other changes are possible too. For example, in Cockney English, “th” becomes “f” so that “think” becomes “fink”

2. Morphology (Word Structure)

Standard English uses specific morphological rules for tenses, number, and aspect. Standard English requires subject-verb agreement and some varieties do not. For example, Standard English would say “She sings”, and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) might say “She sing”.

The auxiliaries “be” and “done” are used differently. While AAVE might say “He done went”, Standard English would say, “He already went.” Standard English would say “He works” to indicate a habitual action while AAVE would say “He be working.”

3. Syntax (Sentence Structure)

Whereas Standard English avoids the use of double negatives, non-standard varieties use them for emphasis. For example,

Standard English would say

Non-standard variety would say

“I don’t know anything.”

“I don’t know nothing”.

“You haven’t seen anything yet”

“You haven’t seen nothing yet.”

In non-standard varieties, word order might shift for emphasis or style. For example, “Ain’t nobody got time for that” She don’t like ice cream. Also, different varieties of English use distinct verb tenses or aspects. Such that the Standard English uses the present perfect tense where some non-standard varieties use the simple past tense.

4. Lexicon (Vocabulary)

Vocabulary in Standard English avoids regional slangs and idiomatic expressions and tends to use more formal or technical vocabulary. Varieties may employ more colloquial or regional terms and include local or cultural slang as Multicultural London English would say “innit”, Southern American English has “y’all” and Scots have “bairn” for “child” other examples: “gonna”, “wanna”, “cuz”

In addition, different varieties of English have distinct expressions, such as “lift” (UK) vs. “elevator” (US)

5. Pragmatics and Register

Standard English is often associated with formal contexts: education, media, government, and may avoid discourse features common in casual or local speech, whereas non-standard varieties may be more informal. While Standard English tends towards formal, precise language use, non-standard varieties often make use of informal discourse markers such as “you know”, “man”, “like”

Since Standard English is often associated with education, professionalism, and authority, non-standard varieties may be

incorrectly perceived as “incorrect” rather than just different, but it is one of the many dialectal variants of English and is acknowledged as a superposed variant because it was not a naturally occurring language variety, but rather a product of conscious planning and human intervention. The origins of Standard English can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries, when English was becoming the dominant language in the British Isles.

Conclusion

Standard English differs from other varieties mainly in terms of prescriptive grammar, morphological regularity, and socially sanctioned pronunciation and vocabulary. However, non-standard varieties are equally systematic and expressive, shaped by regional, social, and cultural influences. Whereas Standard English is used in education, government and media, following rules and grammar books/dictionaries, non-standard English is used in informal speech and local communities with oral and community-based rules. Standard English is often associated with higher education/status while non-standard varieties can be stigmatized or seen as “incorrect”. The reason why prejudices against their use persist is due to the theory of language upon which the processes of standardization was based. Following the prescriptive theory of language, judgments on the selection of dialects have been based on the notions of “correctness”, the “the best” and the “pure”, which linked language with morality, and by appealing to an idealized form of usage. In making the case for the standardization of English, it was argued that the “best” language was spoken by the “best” people and any other form was deemed “corrupt” and spoken by “corrupt” people. Little

wonder majority of English speakers strive to acquire the standard variety. However, no variety of English is inherently “wrong” — only different in context and function. While the non-standard varieties may deviate from standardized norms, they are linguistically valid, governed by their own consistent rules, and play an essential role in expressing cultural identity and local heritage. Understanding these differences not only improves our awareness of language variation but also promotes linguistic tolerance, inclusivity and will enhance accurate language analysis.

BILIOGRAPHY

Akujobi, O.S. & Umoh, G.I.(2022) Varieties of the English Language in Nigeria: The Socio-Linguistic Implication on Communication. International Journal of Arts, Language, Linguistics and Literary Studies Vol. 11(2) 88-97.

Chukwu, E. (2025) Class notes of Phonetics and Phonology

Clark, UIL. (2007). *Variations and Change in English*. https://publications.aston.ac.uk/id/ep rint/439/1/studying_language_2a.pdf Retrieved on 8-8-25

Nnamdi -Eruchalu, G. (2025) Class notes of Lexicology and Semantics

Qianwen, Y. and Hungmei, R.
(2024). *Exploring Standard English:
Its Superposed Variety, Historical
Development, and Social
Implications*. International Journal of
Social Science and Humanity. Doi:
10.18178/ijssh.2024.14.2.1197
Retrieved on 8-8-25

Sankoff, D. (2024). *Language
Variation and Change*
doi:10.1017/S0954394525000018
retrieved on 2-8-2025