

# Who needs Standard English?

Bas Aarts

The notion of 'Standard English' (SE) has recently come under scrutiny, especially in social media. The discussion does not pertain to differences *between* standard varieties, such as variations in spelling or grammar between Standard British English (SBE) and Standard American English (SAE), but has centred on whether we should recognise the notion of Standard English at all, whether it should be taught, and whether it should be used by authors and editors in the publishing industry.

## Standard English in English schools

To address these questions, let's first take a look at how Standard English is presented within an educational context. The 2013 National Curriculum for England describes Standard English as follows:

Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books, I did it and I wasn't doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most registers. The aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed in writing and in relatively formal speaking.

This description appears in an **online glossary of grammatical terms** for teachers in English primary and secondary schools, published by the UK Department for Education (DfE). I used the label 'description' for this entry in the glossary, because it cannot be called a definition, even though it is intended as one! But even as a description of Standard English, it is extremely unhelpful and problematic, and it is hard to see how it could be useful for teachers.

First of all, the label 'Standard English' suggests, or at least implies, that this variety is superior to other varieties, and for that reason language users should aspire to master it. The implication becomes clear from one of the senses of the word 'standard' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'A generally accepted exemplar of correctness or perfection, with regard to something; a perfect or representative model of a quality, type, or attribute.' Most linguists agree that standard varieties are not privileged over any other varieties. For example, SAE is not superior to African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

The National Curriculum description claims that 'Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms'. But what exactly does that mean? Which range of forms? A few examples of standard forms are given, but unless students already *know* that these are Standard English – and that the unmentioned versions

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*them books, I done it and I wasn't doing nothing* are not – how on earth will they be able to recognise whether or not particular expressions or uses of grammar belong to the standard? The National Curriculum fails to make clear exactly what Standard English is, how it can be recognised and why it is important to teach it. It also does not explicitly make clear that *not* using Standard English in certain settings is fine, and should not be stigmatised. Many linguists have pointed out that wordings such as that used in the National Curriculum description are exclusionary, and they have a point.

### One worldwide standard?

Recently a discussion about Standard English erupted on social media. At the end of 2022 a TikTok video posted by an American teacher went viral. They suggested that the notion of Standard English upholds white supremacy, citing the 2020 book *Linguistic Justice* by April Baker-Bell. Examples of instructions for students that teachers should avoid included: 'starting an essay with an introduction that includes a thesis', 'citing your sources', and 'using transition words such as *however* and *therefore*'. Although I fail to see how these common-sense pieces of advice support white supremacy, there is some truth to the view that the teaching and learning of Standard English is easier for children from certain backgrounds, because they already know what Standard English is, and because they hear it around them more often. The National Curriculum description of Standard English above is certainly problematic in this respect. Notice how it suggests that there is just one standard and, oddly, that this standard is used across the world.

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All of this raises the question of whether we can salvage the notion of Standard English. I believe that we can, but we do need to define it carefully, and we need to recognise that there isn't a single standard for English, but that there are many.

The burgeoning field of World Englishes has taught us that there are many different global standards of English, and that each of these is worth studying in its own right. To take the view that there is a single global standard English is outdated, undesirable and impractical, especially if it is based on 'Old World' models such as SBE or SAE. Lynne Murphy, in **a previous focus paper for the CIEP** ('In a globalised world, should we retain different Englishes?'), discussed the problems that beset a global standard English variety, and argued that instead we should expect local varieties, such as Sri Lankan English, Kenyan English or Singapore English, to evolve further.

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### Standards are still important

Murphy's views make sense: we should not reject standard varieties of World Englishes by only paying attention to traditional standard varieties, such as SBE and SAE, in research, education and publishing. Each World English standard variety has a role to play in the communities in which it is used. In education, if there is no standard for a particular variety of English, then there is no way for teachers to teach that variety. Teaching and learning are simply not possible in an 'anything goes' environment. And in publishing, too, standard varieties of English, as codified in style guides, will continue to play an important role in ensuring the consistent use of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

This means that editors working on publications intended for particular audiences should familiarise themselves with the conventions of local varieties of English. For example, it is well-known that in several varieties of World English the progressive construction

is used more widely than in the 'Old World' varieties. The linguist Peter Siemund cites some examples:

- *You must be knowing him.* (Indian English)
- *That bottle is containing sulphuric acid.* (Malaysian English)
- *I am smelling something burning.* (Nigerian English)

Clearly, these examples should not be 'corrected' in these countries if they are part of the standard variety.

## Changing standards

What I have said above emphatically does not mean that we should regard a particular standard variety as superior or fixed in any way. As an example of how the standard has changed, consider the use of 'singular *they*', as in *My best friend called, and they told me that they would be late.* Although learners of English across the world are still being taught that this is ungrammatical, because the plural pronoun *they* does not agree with the singular noun *friend*, singular *they* is now widely accepted, and even became the **American Dialect Society's word of the decade (2010–19)**. And of course, as one would

expect, the CIEP's style guide offers admirably sensible advice on this matter: 'Singular "they", "their", "them" have been perfectly acceptable non-gendered usage since at least the 16th century.' Naturally, whether we view a particular language directive as a '**zombie rule**' or not is often a personal matter. Did you stumble over my own use of singular *they* earlier in this piece? Your answer may indicate how sensitive you are to the use of certain pronouns in English.

So what is the answer to the question that I posed in the title of this piece? It seems to me that we still need standard varieties of English to enable teaching and learning, and to ensure consistent usage within a particular variety. However, because societies change all the time, how we conceive of any standard variety of English ought to respond to the changing needs of the users of that variety. This means that we should encode the standards of different World Englishes flexibly and dynamically in grammar books, textbooks and style guides. Perhaps it is also time to avoid the label 'Standard English', and use 'General English' instead to avoid the connotations of superiority that the word 'standard' evokes.

## Resources

American Dialect Society (2020). 2019 Word of the Year is '(my) pronouns,' Word of the Decade is singular 'they'. [americandialect.org/2019-word-of-the-year-is-my-pronouns-word-of-the-decade-is-singular-they](https://americandialect.org/2019-word-of-the-year-is-my-pronouns-word-of-the-decade-is-singular-they)

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