

1. Studying English Dialects

[...]

We are very used to talking about our language as if it were a single, clearly defined entity: *the English Language*. Looked at in one way, this is only sensible, particularly when we think of the written language. English is a language which has its own literature, its own grammar books, and its own dictionaries. It is also a language which is quite clearly not French, not German, not Chinese – or any other language. To talk about the English language does actually mean something.

This view of English can be rather misleading, though. It is equally sensible, looked at in another way, to claim that there is no such thing as the English language, if by that we were to mean that there was only one way to speak or write English. The point is that English – like all other languages – comes in many different forms, particularly when we think of the spoken language – and in this book we are concentrating on spoken English. Anyone can tell that the English of the British Isles is different from the English of the United States or Australia. The English of England is clearly different

from the English of Scotland or Wales. The English of Lancashire is noticeably different from the English of Northumberland or Kent. And the English of Liverpool is not the same as the English of Manchester. There is very considerable regional variation within the English language as it is spoken in different parts of the British Isles and different parts of the world. The fact is that the way you speak English has a lot to do with *where you are from* – where you grew up and first learnt your language. [...]

Where you are from, of course, will not be the only thing which influences how you speak. People speak different kinds of English depending on what kind of social background they come from, so that some Liverpool speakers may be ‘more Liverpudlian’ than others, and some Manchester people may be easier to identify as Mancunians than others. Some speakers may even be so ‘posh’ that it is not possible to tell where they come from at all (we shall discuss this further in Unit 2).

These social and geographical kinds of language are known as DIALECTS. Dialects, then, have to do with a

speaker's social and geographical origins – and we are talking here about *all* speakers. It is important to emphasise that everybody speaks a dialect. Dialects are not peculiar or old-fashioned or rustic ways of speaking. They are not something which only other people have. Just as everybody comes from somewhere and has a particular kind of social background, so everybody – including you – speaks a dialect. Your dialect is the particular combination of English words, pronunciations and grammatical forms that you share with other people from your area and your social background, and that differs in certain ways from the combination used by people from other areas and backgrounds.

DIALECT

It is also important to point out that none of these combinations – none of these dialects – is linguistically superior in any way to any other. We may as individuals be rather fond of our own dialect. This should not make us think, though, that it is actually any better than any other dialect. Dialects are not good or bad, nice or nasty, right or wrong – they are just different from one another, and it is the mark of a civilised society that it tolerates different dialects just as it tolerates different races, religions and sexes. American English is not

better – or worse – than British English. The dialect of BBC newsreaders is not linguistically superior to the dialect of Bristol dockers or Suffolk farmworkers. There is nothing you can do or say in one dialect that you cannot do or say in another dialect.

Scientists who study dialects – **DIALECTOLOGISTS** – start from the assumption that all dialects are linguistically equal. (We will discuss the issue of social equality in Unit 3.) What dialectologists are interested in are differences between dialects. The task of dialectologists is to describe different dialects, to note differences between them, and, importantly, to try and explain how these differences came about. We shall be looking at different aspects of the dialectologist's work in subsequent units.

DIALECTOLOGIST

Most people who have grown up somewhere in the English-speaking world are already rather good English dialectologists, even if they have never studied English dialectology. During our lives, we become familiar with a wider and wider range of varieties of English and are usually able to tell quite a lot about a person we meet for the first time simply from the way they speak. Their words, grammar and pronunciation tell us things about their regional and social background. [...]

2. Posh and Less Posh Dialects

Dialects are both regional and social. The dialect with the greatest prestige is Standard English, which has slightly different forms in different parts of the English-speaking world. It can be spoken with any kind of accent or pronunciation.

Some English sentences

She don't want none of that.

We ain't got none of them sweets.

He's the one what done it.

[...]

STANDARD ENGLISH

There is no doubt that the dialect of English which has the highest social status is the dialect which is widely known as STANDARD ENGLISH. Standard English is the dialect which is normally used in printed books and newspapers; it is the dialect used in the education system; and it is the dialect found in dictionaries and grammar books. Standard English uses grammatical forms such as:

I don't want any.

She hasn't done it.

those people over there

They did it yesterday.

the person who went

He hurt himself.

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NONSTANDARD DIALECTS

NONSTANDARD DIALECTS, on the other hand, are dialects which use dialects grammatical forms such as:

I don't want none.

She ain't done it.

them people over there

They done it yesterday.

the person what went

He hurt hisself.

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Forms such as these are not 'wrong' in any way and should not be regarded as 'mistakes'. They are used by millions of English speakers around the world, and are representative of grammatical systems that are different from Standard English, not linguistically inferior to it.

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(We will discuss the grammar of nonstandard dialects further in Units 9, 10 and 11.)

The normal social convention what we operates with in the English-speaking world be that writing, particularly writing intended for publication, should be done in Standard English. This here book ain't no exception – it be writ in Standard English. This, however, be a matter of social convention. There ain't nothing what you can say nor write in Standard English what can't be said nor writ in other dialects. That's why we's writ this here paragraph in a nonstandard dialect, just to make the point.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that nonstandard dialect forms have less prestige than Standard English constructions. This is hardly surprising, since the Standard English dialect is spoken natively by British people who can be regarded as being at the 'top' of the social scale, in the sense that they have more money, influence, education and prestige than people lower down the social scale.

The Standard English dialect itself is not entirely uniform. Scottish Standard English, for example, is clearly different from the Standard English of England at

a number of points. It uses words such as *outwith* 'outside', *ron* 'drainpipe', and *ashet* 'serving dish' which are not known in England or Wales. And Scottish Standard English speakers also use grammatical forms that are not found in the Standard English elsewhere, such as:

Had you a good time last night?
My clothes need washed.

and

Will I shut the door?

whereas similar speakers in England and Wales would say:

Did you have a good time last night?
My clothes need washing.

and

Shall I shut the door?

[...]

Generally speaking, however, there is relatively little geographical variation within Standard English. It is as you go further down the social scale that regional

differences become more apparent. The most regional of regional dialect forms are to be found at the 'bottom' of the social scale. Thus, the Standard English relative pronoun who corresponds to a number of different nonstandard forms in different parts of the country:

Standard English dialect

the woman who taught us

Nonstandard dialects

the woman what taught us

the woman as taught us

the woman at taught us

the woman which taught us

ACCENT

This relationship between social and regional variation, with more regional variation at the bottom of the social scale and less at the top, also applies to ACCENTS. In this book we make a distinction between dialect and accent. Accent simply refers to pronunciation. Your accent is the way you pronounce English when you speak it – and of course everybody therefore has an accent. Your dialect, on the other hand, has to do also with the grammatical forms that you use, as well, perhaps, as any regional vocabulary that you employ.

It is important to make this distinction between dialect and accent, in order to be able to show that it is possible to speak Standard English with a regional accent.

Standard English has nothing to do with pronunciation. In fact, most people who speak Standard English do so with some form of regional pronunciation, so that you can tell where they come from much more by their accent than by their grammar or vocabulary. There is only a small minority of the population, perhaps 3 to 5 per cent, who speak Standard English with the totally regionless accent we sometimes call the 'BBC' accent.

Here again, the further down the social scale you go, the more regional differences in accent you will find. The upper classes who speak with a 'BBC' accent do not betray their geographical origins at all when they speak, although of course they do give lots of clues about their social origins! [...]

SOURCE

Peter Trudgill, *Dialects* (2nd edition), Routledge, 2004.