3 The standard language myth

> Ah, well, the truth is always one thing, but in a way it's the other thing, the gossip, that counts. It shows where people's hearts lie.
>
> Paul Scott, *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968)

Given uncontrovertible facts about the way language works, a spoken standardized language can only be understood as an abstraction. But it is a useful abstraction, one constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis with great care and attention, because it serves a number of functions.

At this juncture, it is necessary to consider in some detail exactly what this mythical beast called Standard US English is, in the minds of the people who recreate it on a daily basis.

WHAT WE CALL STANDARD US ENGLISH

People are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, so much so that they have no trouble describing and defining it, much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn, or describe a being from *Star Trek's* planet Vulcan, or tell us who King Arthur was and why he needed a Round Table. For the most part these definitions will be firmly founded in the understanding that these are mythical, imaginary constructions; nevertheless, the definitions will have much in common, because they are part of our shared cultural heritage.

The way we conceive and define Standard US English brings to light a number of assumptions and misassumptions about language. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (tenth edition, 1993), which proclaims itself *The Voice of Authority*, provides a typical definition:

> Standard English: the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.

This definition assumes that the written and spoken language are equal, in terms of both how they are used, and how they should be used. It sets spelling and pronunciation on a common footing, and compounds this generalization by bringing in both formal and informal language use. While the definition makes some room for "regional differences" it makes none at all for social ones, and in fact it is quite definite about the social construction of Standard US English: it is the language of the educated. What is meant by "educated" is left unstated in this entry, and its implications are not fully explored anywhere else in the dictionary. What language might be spoken by those who are the *opposite* of the educated is also not made clear, but whoever these people are, they are drawn into the definition by its final component: Standard US English is *acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.* The lexicographer assumes the consent of the non-educated, uneducated, or lesser educated to the authority of the educated in matters of written and spoken language.

Other definitions bring some important generalizations about Standard US English to the fore: *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (first edition, 1995) also cites educated speakers as the sole possessors of the standard language, but they bring in a specific subgroup of the educated in that they assert that "most announcers on the BBC speak standard English." *Chambers Dictionary* (1994) is more specific about the path to Standard US English: "the form of English taught in schools." In 1978 the *English Journal* noted a general perception in the public of a "'standard standard'. Some people call it 'broadcast' or 'publications' standard, because most newspapers and television news shows use it."

More specific information on exactly how the lexicographer draws on the language of the educated is provided by interviews with the pronunciation editor at Merriam-Webster which appeared in various newspapers around the appearance of that dictionary's tenth edition. It falls to the pronunciation editor to decide which possible pronunciations are included in the dictionary, and how they are ordered. "Usage dictates acceptability," he is reported as saying. "There is no other non-arbitrary way to decide" (*New York Times*, July 22, 1993: C1, C8).

In order to pin down this "majority rule" the editor listens to "talk shows, medical shows, interviews, news, commentary, the weather" (ibid.) on the radio and on television. The editorial preface to the dictionary is more specific about this procedure; it lists politicians, professors, curators, artists, musicians, doctors, engineers, preachers, activists, and journalists among the type of educated person whose English is consulted as a part of this process.

> In truth, though, there can be no objective standard for correct pronunciation other than the usage of thoughtful and, in particular, educated speakers of English. Among such speakers one hears much variation

> in pronunciation . . . [our attempt is to] include all variants of a word that are used by educated speakers.
>
> (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition, 1993: 31a)

The editors claim an objective standard (that of the language of the educated) and at the same time they acknowledge variation among educated speakers. This apparent inconsistency is resolved by the policy which includes *all variants that are used by educated speakers*. A close look at the pronunciations listed in the dictionary, however, indicates that this cannot be the case. An entry with three or more possible pronunciations is rare. If Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary* truly intends to include all pronunciations of the educated, then their definition of who is educated must be very narrow.

It must be clear that this process cannot be representative in any real way. What proportion of even the *educated* population has regular access to the broadcast media? How many of us discuss our views on the budget, on foreign affairs, or on local government in a forum which is broadcast to a wider audience? The *uneducated*, who by the dictionary definition must constitute the greatest number of native speakers of English, are even less represented.

Perhaps there is no way to write a dictionary which is truly descriptive in terms of pronunciation; perhaps it is necessary to choose one social group to serve as a model. Perhaps there is even some rationale for using the "educated" as this group. But there is nothing *objective* about this practice. It is the ordering of social groups in terms of who has authority to determine how language is *best used*.

Clearly, the rationale for this ordering derives at least in part from the perceived superiority of the written language. Persons with more education are more exposed to the written language and literary traditions; they may, in simple terms, *write* better than the "less educated." Why this should mean that their pronunciation is somehow more informed, more genuine, more authoritative, is never made clear. Definitions of standard language supplied by people who do not write dictionaries for a living echo many of the themes already established, but they sometimes become very specific, in quite interesting ways:

Standard English is . . .[1]

> having your nouns and your verbs agree.
>
> the English legitimatized by wide usage and certified by expert consensus, as in a dictionary usage panel.
>
> what I learned in school, in Mrs. McDuffey's class, in Virginia, in the mid seventies. It really bothers me when I read and hear other people who obviously skipped her class.
>
> the proper language my mother stressed from the time I was old enough to talk.

> one that few people would call either stilted or "low," delivered with a voice neither gutteral nor strident, clearly enunciated but not priggish about it, with no one sound having a noticibly distinctive character. It is a non-regional speech but clearly and easily understood in all regions. . . . Standard English uses, in general, only one syllable per enunciated vowel so most accents from the south and west are not to the pattern.

These references to the authority of educational institutions and unnamed "experts" correspond to the dictionary definitions in a fairly predictable way. Like the dictionary definitions, there is an occasional statement which makes it clear that written and spoken languages are being considered as one and the same thing when in fact they are not. What is different about these personal definitions is the willingness to identify specific grammatical and phonological points which distinguish standard from "non-standard" usage, and a highly emotional and personal element in the definitions. People feel strongly about their language, and are willing to express their opinions.

The most straightforward and unapologetically ideological definitions of standard language come from those who make a living protecting it from change: "Good English has to do with the upper classes . . . with the cultural and intellectual leaders . . ." (Presidential address to the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters in 1965, as cited in Finegan 1980: 174). Writers like Edwin Newman, John Simon, and William Safire have published extensively on their view of the language, how it should be spoken and written, and why their authority in these issues should not be questioned. These men, and others like them, make a good living writing about Standard English because they meet a demand:

> Aristocratic by preference, devoted to literature and the classics, and practiced in the monitored phrase, they see themselves as protectors and conservers of the durably admirable. Intelligibility is not enough; economy, exactitude, and grace are sought – and continuity with an illustrious past. And the reading public seeks their guidance and honors their judgments – at least by lip service, if not in observance. As models of sensitivity and good taste, they are salaried to be opinionated.
>
> (Finegan 1980: 160)

The social domain of Standard English has been established: it is the language of the educated, in particular those who have achieved a high level of expertise in the written language. But this simple definition of Standard English is complicated when variation over space is considered.

Dennis Preston has compiled a body of empirical studies in which he has quantified and generalized non-linguists' beliefs about the geographic distribution of a standard language. In "Where they speak correct English" (1989a), he asked seventy-six young white natives of southern Indiana to rank all fifty states as well as New York City and Washington DC in terms

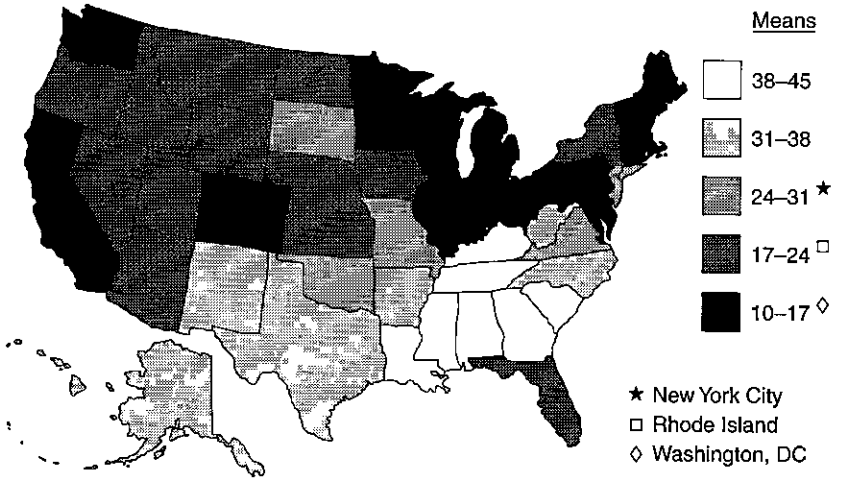

Figure 3.1 Ratings of the fifty states, New York City, and Washington DC for language "correctness" on a scale of 1–52 (lowest = "best") by seventy-six young, first- and second-year, white undergraduates from southern Indiana
Source: Preston 1989a: 54

of "correct English," so that a ranking of 1 was where the *most correct* English is spoken, and 52, the *least correct*. Figure 3.1 provides Preston's visual representation of the means for the respondents' rankings.

If a high level of education is a primary characteristic of Standard US English, then the opinions of these college students from Indiana would seem to provide relevant information about just where that language is spoken. Preston's analysis indicated that these informants found the most correct English in five areas: North Central (including their own speech); Mid-Atlantic (excluding New York City); New England; Colorado; and the West Coast. Standard deviations indicate that the students are most consistent in their positive evaluation in the case of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with their agreement decreasing as they move eastward through Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and finally Washington DC (which showed little consistency in ranking with a standard deviation of 15.67). The worst standard deviation is for New York City, which Preston hypothesizes has to do with conflicting stereotypes about the city: from the center of culture to the center of crime. Most interesting perhaps is the incredibly high level of consistency in the way these students found a lack of correct English in the south. Mississippi ranked last in terms of correct English and also was the most consistently ranked state. Preston (1989a) takes the scores for the southern states as "further proof of the salience of areas seen as nonstandard" (56).

From these various approaches to a standard US English, a picture begins to emerge. *Standard US English is the language spoken and written by persons*

- with no regional accent;
- who reside in the midwest, far west or perhaps some parts of the northeast (but never in the south);
- with more than average or superior education;
- who are themselves educators or broadcasters;
- who pay attention to speech, and are not sloppy in terms of pronunciation or grammar;
- who are easily understood by all;
- who enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper in language.

There are some interesting conflicts in these general statements and approaches to language. We want language to be geographically neutral, because we believe that this neutrality will bring with it a greater range of communication. The assumption, of course, is that midwest is neutral. We want it to be structured and rule-governed and clear. Something as important as language cannot be left to itself: normal people are not smart enough, not aware enough, to be in charge of their own language. There must be experts, persons in charge, structured authority. *Accent* falls into the dominion of uneducated, sloppy, language anarchists. Those areas of the country which embody these characteristics most saliently in the minds of a good many US English speakers (the south, New York City), are the natural home of accent. Everybody else speaks standard English, and as such, has no accent. A native of Mississippi or Brooklyn may have exactly the same educational background, intelligence, and point to make as their counterparts in Ohio and Colorado, but, we believe, they do so with an accent. This mindset is institutionalized in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989):

> [Accent is] The mode of utterance peculiar to an individual, locality, or nation, as "he has a slight accent, a strong provincial accent, an indisputably Irish, Scotch, American, French or German accent." ... This utterance consists mainly in a prevailing quality of tone, or in a peculiar alteration of pitch, but may include *mispronunciation* of vowels or consonants, *misplacing* of stress, and *misinflection* of a sentence. The locality of a speaker is generally clearly marked by this kind of accent.
>
> (emphasis added)

The judgmental tone is quite evident even without the heavily significant choice of *mis*pronunciation, *mis*placing, and *mis*inflection. It follows from this definition that there is a correct regional pronunciation, but it is not explicitly named.

From a legal perspective, Matsuda notes the similarities between the construction of standard English/non-accent and other hidden norms codified in our legal institutions:

> As feminist theorists have pointed out, everyone has a gender, but the hidden norm in law is male. As critical race theorists have pointed out, everyone has a race, but the hidden norm in law is white. In any dyadic relationship, the two ends are equidistant from each other. If the parties are equal in power, we see them as equally different from each other. When the parties are in a relationship of domination and subordination we tend to say that the dominant is normal, and the subordinate is different from normal. And so it is with accent. . . . People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent.
>
> (1991: 1361)

The myth of standard language persists because it is carefully tended and propagated. Individuals acting for a larger social group take it upon themselves to control and limit spoken language variation, the most basic and fundamental of human socialization tools. The term *standard* itself does much to promote this idea: we speak of one standard and in opposition, non-standard, or substandard. This is the core of an *ideology* of standardization which empowers certain individuals and institutions to make these decisions.

WORDS ABOUT WORDS

It would be possible to trace the evolution of scholarly thought about the social relationship between varieties of US English solely on the basis of the terms used to draw real or perceived distinctions. The use of the terms *standard*, *standard language*, and *standard English* have remained fairly stable in the literature over time, with the occasional and more recent emergence of the term *mainstream language*. Mainstream is a term used widely in other fields, particularly in education, and has been discussed in those forums. Heath (1983) defines mainstreamers as those who

> exist in societies around the world that rely on formal education systems to prepare children for participation in settings involving literacy. Cross-national descriptions characterize these groups as literate, school-oriented, aspiring to upward mobility through success in formal institutions, and looking beyond the primary networks of family and community for behavioral models and value orientations.
>
> (391–392)

Mainstream as it is defined here (while not without problems which will be addressed below) is quite useful to the discussion at hand. The assumptions which underlie the labeling of one language as a *standard* against

which other languages must be measured are largely absent. The opposite of standard appears as *substandard* or *non-standard*; these terms automatically bring with them a uni-directionality and subordination which is counterproductive to a discussion of language variation in linguistic terms.[2]

The opposite of *mainstream* is *non-mainstream*. An attempt to turn Heath's definition inside out demonstrates that the label *non-mainstream* brings some unfounded generalizations with it, if it is applied to whole language communities:

> Non-mainstreamers exist in communities which do not rely on formal education systems to prepare children for participation in settings involving literacy. These groups are illiterate, school-resistant, do not aspire to upward mobility through success in formal institutions, and they remain within the primary networks of family and community for behavioral models and value orientations.

Clearly, Heath's definition is problematic when it is thus recast. Many problems arise from the fact that the definition hinges almost exclusively on literacy and does not distinguish between spoken and written language. While the definition may work for a more general discussion of cultural and social differences between community types, it cannot serve as a basis for a distinction between *language communities*. If that attempt is made, this definition would necessarily find both Flannery O'Connor and Joseph Conrad, two of the most respected writers of US fiction in this century, to be mainstreamers – which they would clearly be, until they opened their mouths: O'Connor was a native of Georgia; her teachers at the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Iowa told and retold stories about how impossible she was to understand when she spoke. Conrad was not a native speaker of English, and agonized all his life about speaking in public because of his accent. To *listen* to these two highly literate, highly educated persons was not to listen to speakers of Standard US English. In their lifetimes they could only be called speakers of non-standard or non-mainstream English.

Heath's definition, thus recast, proposes, for example, that all speakers of Appalachian English are resistant to formal education. That this cannot be taken as uniformly true must be clear, simply because there is movement between cultures and language communities. Not all members of peripheralized, disempowered communities find enough rewards and support in their own communities to stay within them. Many persons who function outside the mainstream embrace the goals and implied promises of participation in mainstream culture. If this were not so in terms of spoken language, then there would be no community internal discussion of language, and accent reduction courses would have no willing students.

Nevertheless, this definition of mainstreamers remains useful because it touches on two relevant points in trying to set up a reasonable way to distinguish between what is deemed socially acceptable and what is not,

in terms of spoken language. First, it is clear that in this country, power and authority in language are tied inextricably to education and literacy. When Heath expands on her discussion of mainstreamers in the Piedmont, this becomes clear:

> Secondary sources, not the face-to-face network, are usually authoritative for mainstreamers. They choose their movies on the advice of the critics; they select their automobile tires on the recommendations of consumers' guides; they seek out professional advice for marital problems, and for interior decorating and landscaping ideas. An individual's assertion of formal credentials – either university degrees or public awards and distinction – makes him an authority. They formalize or "spell out in writing" rules for group activities, such as neighborhood tennis clubs, ladies' auxiliary clubs of the church. . . .
>
> (237)

Second, values of family and local networks stand sometimes, but not always, in contrast to the values of the core institutions which promote education and literacy. Thus, a more useful definition of mainstreamers and non-mainstreamers in terms of spoken language can be constructed by departing from Heath, as shown in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1

Mainstream US English speakers function in communities and institutions which rely on formal education systems to prepare children for participation in the community. Nationally, these speakers are *perceived* as living primarily in the midwest, far west, and some parts of the east and/or as upper middle class or upper class, as literate, school-oriented, and as aspiring to upward mobility through success in formal institutions. They look beyond the primary networks of family and community for sociolinguistic models and value orientations.	*Non-mainstream US English* speakers function in communities and institutions which rely less on formal education systems to prepare children for participation in the community. Nationally, these speakers are *perceived* as living primarily in the far south and inner urban centers, and/or as working class or lower class, as less interested in literacy or school, and as aspiring to local rather than supranational success in formal institutions. They tend to stay within networks of family and community for sociolinguistic models and value orientations.

Because the use of the standard/non-standard dichotomy is so firmly entrenched both in the literature and in the minds of the speakers, it is not possible to simply replace it. Where it is possible, however, mainstream/

non-mainstream will take its place. For the sake of brevity, "mainstream US English" will sometimes appear as MUSE, and its counterpart, "non-mainstream US English," as NMUSE.

A related issue is the matter of what to call specific social and regional varieties of US English. Scholarly literature has referred to the language spoken by a good proportion of the African American community (over time) as Negro English (NE), Black English (BE), Ebonics, Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black Vernacular English (BVE) and most recently, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American English Vernacular (AAEV). My practice here is to use that term preferred by the African American community, which currently seems to be AAVE.

An even more complex and ideologically fraught issue is what to call those varieties of English which are not AAVE. It seems that this problem is solved by refusing to address it, for the most part. Most linguists seem to avoid the term White English Vernacular (WEV), because this sets up a racial distinction which cannot be supported by fact: there are both African Americans (and in smaller numbers) European, Latino, and Asian Americans who speak AAVE, and European, Asian, Latino, and African Americans who do not speak it. Finally, to claim that all European Americans speak mainstream US English as defined above would be to deny obvious and demonstrable truths.[3]

Mainstream English, as it is defined here, is an abstraction. It is an attempt to isolate from the full set of all varieties of US English those varieties which are not overtly stigmatized, and which find some degree of acceptance and favor over space and social distinctions. As we will see, these varieties are not coincidentially the language of primarily white, middle- and upper-middle-class, and midwestern American communities.