

All varieties of English are equal. Discuss.

In this essay, I will describe some ways in which varieties of English differ from one another, and then explore in what ways it might be possible to compare them in order to evaluate whether they can be regarded as 'equal'.

Like any language, English is used in a wide range of different situations, both spoken and written. The particular variety of English used at any time will be affected by two factors: the situation in which it is being used, and the identity of the person who is using it.

The term STANDARD ENGLISH has come to be used to describe a particular variant of the language about which there is broad agreement over grammatical and spelling rules, and I will use the abbreviation SE to refer to it in the rest of this essay.

We can look for variation in English in both spoken and written forms of the language. The four types of variation seen are in VOCABULARY and GRAMMAR (manifest in both spoken and written English), PRONUNCIATION (spoken only), and SPELLING (written only).

#### VOCABULARY

The range of different words used by any speaker is affected by the context in which discourse takes place. For example, a scientist discussing the results of a

laboratory experiment with a colleague will probably use many words that would not come up in a subsequent conversation with the same colleague in a pub about football. The same person writing a love letter will use different words than the ones they employ in a legal writ.

The cultural context also influences what range of words speakers use, with some words being specific to certain geographies or social groups. This may in part be due to the different set of phenomena encountered (for example, people living in the countryside may have a greater variety of words relating to farming practices than those in the city), but is also a means used to demonstrate affinity with a particular grouping of people. This is especially notable in the use of slang expressions, or in the case when one group of people makes use of words which are not used by their immediate neighbours. An example of this is the 'truce' terms used by children in playgrounds, which as well as varying from one region to another, are not used by adults at all: in an informal test of this, I asked the parents of several children at a local school if they knew the truce word used by their primary school child: not one of them knew that it was 'scribs'.

## GRAMMAR

Grammar can be considered to be the set of MORPHOLOGICAL and SYNTACTIC rules used to govern how words are combined into phrases or sentences.

Morphological rules define how the structure of words varies with context: for example, in most cases, the morphology of SE dictates that a verb has no suffix for first person forms, but has an 's' suffix when used in the third person singular: "I eat", "he eats"; "I walk", "she walks", etc.. However, morphological rules are not the same in all varieties of English: as Kerswill points out (Kerswill, 2004:12) not all speech communities share this particular rule, with people in Reading using forms such as "I eats" or "I walks".

Syntactic rules govern how individual words may be grouped into phrases and sentences. There is some variation (although relatively little) in the syntactic rules that apply to different varieties of English. African-American Vernacular English allows double (or multiple) negation, for example "I don't have nothing" compared to SE "I don't have anything" (James, 1997).

In fact, the syntax rules for all varieties appear to have much more in common: for example, the order of words in the sentence "I like pancakes" is subject, verb, object (SVO), and although it is possible to arrange words in a different order than SVO, "only [SVO] is the natural, usual, 'unmarked' order in

English" (Crystal, 1997:98).

#### PRONUNCIATION

The same utterance spoken by different people will sound different, and one of the most noticeable differences is the way that words are pronounced. This is largely due to the speaker's ACCENT, which will have a broadly predictable effect on the way that certain words or syllables are realised phonetically. For example, the vowel "a" in words such as "bath" may be pronounced /æ/, /ɑː/, or /æː/ for speakers in Manchester, London or Exeter respectively. RECEIVED

PRONUNCIATION (RP) can be thought of as analogous to SE in that it describes a particular accent which is sometimes used as a standard to which other accents may be compared.

#### SPELLING

Spelling is only an issue for the written form of English, and it is consequently much more standardised than the other three aspects already mentioned.

Variations in spelling do occur between cultures - for example English "colour" and American "color" - and times: "Traditionally, the British spelling is *millepede* and the American one *millipede*. However, the spelling with I is now predominant in Britain" (Trask:2001,187).

## SE AND RP

SE does have a special status in that it is generally accepted as the standard for written English: there is no reason why SE *per se* should be better than another variation for this purpose, but it makes sense to agree on a specific type of English for simplicity. Obviously, not all written English is SE, but SE serves as a useful *lingua franca* which is commonly understood. And convention dictates that the use of SE is positively encouraged in certain types of document, such as academic work: if I wuz t'rite ow I spoke it'd be arda t'read, an I probly wunt ge'a goo' mark.

However, although use of SE is sometimes associated with attributes of high social status and intellectual capacity, as a way of speaking English, SE is no more or less 'correct' than any other variety: "it is simply *convenient* to have a standard form of the language which is agreed on by everybody" (Trask, 2001:272).

Similarly, RP (which has no special linguistic merit aside from having been documented and described in a way that makes it easy to use as a reference) is often associated with prestige qualities: "experiments in Britain have shown that speakers using an RP-speaking guise are generally regarded as more intelligent and more educated" (Trudgill, 2000:194-195).

## EVALUATION

In any specific context (such as conversation, or prose, or a lecture), there is no linguistic reason why one variety of English should not be (at least potentially) equal to any other. The types of variation already discussed do not strengthen or weaken the power of English as a means of communication. However, users of English have more to consider than simply whether they can make themselves understood: the type of English used conveys more than just the meaning of what is said. Variations in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling all are used (rightly or wrongly) to infer information about the speaker, and while such inferences may not always be justified, the fact that they take place is understood by speakers of the language. English users deliberately vary their own use of the language – for example by adopting a 'telephone voice', or using a spell checker for formal documents - suggesting that they do not regard all varieties of English as being equal (or at least, they don't think that other people do).

Additionally, as we have seen, English is used in a variety of contexts, both spoken and written, and not purely to communicate meaning: it can also develop social cohesion, articulate emotion, or express artistic impulses (like singing, or poetry). There is no single variety of English which can function equally well in all these contexts, just as there is no single tool in my toolbox

that I can use for all my DIY jobs. Not all varieties of English are equally suited for all situations: for example, poetry can move people emotionally, but would not be the most effective way for a policeman to give instructions in an emergency. Attempting to compare varieties of English is rather like comparing a hammer and a screwdriver.

#### CONCLUSION

There are various ways in which the English language can be expressed, and while social attitudes may dictate that some of these are regarded as more prestigious than others, from a linguistic point of view, no single variety is intrinsically better than any other. However, the situations in which English is used are so varied that it is difficult to regard all varieties as 'equal': it probably doesn't make sense to make qualitative comparisons between different varieties of English, except in specific situations, where there may be broad agreement that a particular type of the language is especially appropriate.

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