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REVIEW ARTICLE

Disinventing standard English

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Review of **Tony Bex & Richard J. Watts (eds),** *Standard English: the widening debate*. London: Routledge. 1999. Pp. xi + 312. Hardback £50, ISBN 0 415 191629; paperback £15.99, ISBN 0 415 191637.

According to D'Souza (1999) the question of standard English 'is one of the great, unresolved problems that we are carrying into the twenty-first century' (p. 271). Why should this question be so important and why so unresolved? And what does the book under review here add to our possible understanding of this issue? There are a number of significant issues here. First, there is the question of definition: what is a standard language? From this follows the ontological question as to whether they actually exist or are merely convenient (or inconvenient) fictions. Are we talking about spoken or written language? And in the global context, there are questions such as whether a global standard of international English exists or is emerging? Or is international intelligibility always a negotiation of possibilities with no obvious standard? And how do the new standard Englishes of Singapore, India, or Hong Kong relate both to all the other forms of English within those countries and to the other regionalized standards as well as the possible international standard? From definitional questions we move on to more political and pedagogical ones: Are standard languages hegemonic forms to be opposed? Are standard languages hegemonic forms to be acquired? Does access to standard language give people greater social and economic mobility, or is this another myth associated with standard languages?

Standard English: a critical reading

These are some of the background questions I bring to a book such as this. Before returning to some of these concerns, I shall discuss more closely the actual contents of the book. It is divided into three main sections, the first to do with the history and ideology of 'Standard English' (SE; the sceptical quotation marks important here, of course), the second on spoken language, and the third on perspectives from outside the UK. Overall, most of the chapters, as well as the brief but critical introductory sections by the editors, are well worth a close read (though a reader looking for a short cut could do worse than reading the two chapters by James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, which seem to cover a great deal of what is said in this book). In the first section, James Milroy's article looks at the relationship between linguistic

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description and standardization, arguing that 'although linguists often disapprove of popular attitudes to correctness, they are themselves in some respects affected by the ideology that conditions these popular views – the ideology of language standardisation with its emphasis on formal and written styles and neglect of the structure of spoken language' (p. 39). Despite claims to be engaged only in description, therefore, many linguists operate with assumptions about grammaticality, uniformity, and spoken and written languages that are far closer to a form of prescriptive standardization than they would ever care to acknowledge. I shall return to this point later.

The other three chapters in the first section, by Richard Watts, Hayley Davis, and Tony Bex, all focus on the historical construction of 'standard English'. Put together, these chapters show how standard English has been constructed at various significant periods, particularly the first sixty years of the eighteenth century, with the conjunction between grammars, prescriptivism, and nation building; the nineteenth-century relationship between language, the invention of tradition and the growth of empire; and the twentieth-century consolidation of class relationships through prescriptions on correctness in grammar and style. Watts argues that the grammar writers of the eighteenth century formed a discourse community that had an important relationship to the growth of social institutions and particularly 'public' education and grammar schools. Interestingly, he suggests that at the core of this socially constructed and educationally institutionalized notion of standard English was the metalinguistic ability to discuss and manipulate grammatical terms and forms. Thus in some ways learning standard English had more to do with learning a particular view of language than with learning a particular form of language.

Davis focuses on lexicography rather than grammar, pointing out that the concept of standard English is 'a confused and confusing one' since it has 'referred to a ''common core of the language'', an ideal or value to be met, the ''true'' meanings behind words, the language of the literati, and those items of vocabulary listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*' (p. 86). Bex, meanwhile, looks at the great early twentieth-century triumvirate of Fowler, Gowers, and Partridge, whose books on grammar and style sat next to many a bible on the family shelves. As Bex argues, the tradition they drew on was not only prescriptivist but also needs to be understood in terms of its social and class origins: their model of English was 'male, class-based, largely drawn from the written mode, and appealed to a particular view of history that privileged the English' (p. 106). Put together, these accounts of the history of the construction of standard English – grammar, words, and style – all point to the multiple meanings and interests that have been interwoven with this history. What these chapters do not, in my opinion, make sufficiently clear – and I shall return to this point – is whether they are arguing that the historical construction of SE has produced a real entity albeit with very particular social and cultural interests, or whether they are suggesting that the notion of SE is a construction in itself, and that we are therefore dealing not with a real thing called standard English but rather a set of myths and practices around something more ephemeral.

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The three chapters in the second section of the book, by Peter Trudgill, Jenny Cheshire, and Ron Carter, focus on the question of spoken, as opposed to written, standard English (SSE vs WSE). Trudgill's is perhaps the most disappointing of the chapters in this book in that it represents very much the sort of unreflective and over-confident discussion common among (socio)linguists that the more careful chapters in the book critique and distance themselves from. For Trudgill, Standard English (capital letters since it is a named dialect like Cockney or Scouse) is 'by far the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view; and it does not have an associated accent' (p. 123). While Trudgill usefully shows that SE is an idiosyncratic dialect compared with other dialects of English, he simply considers SSE to be the spoken version of SE: 'Standard English is a dialect which is spoken as their native variety, at least in Britain, by about 12 per cent – 15 per cent of the population ... The further down the social scale one goes, the more non-standard forms one finds' (p. 124). The problems with this are that: 1. It fails to problematize the notion of SE or to consider its historical and ideological construction; 2. It considers spoken language as nothing more than the voiced equivalent of written language; 3. It operates with a simplistic sociological stance that talks too easily of 'the most important dialect' or 'further down the social scale'; and 4. It fails to consider the social context of spoken language and thus that accent cannot be so easily separated from dialect. This chapter, it seems to me, is an example of how the limited vision of (socio)linguistics has held back discussion of these issues for so long.

Cheshire's and Carter's chapters, by contrast, are more nuanced, and point to interesting differences between spoken and written language. Both reiterate the point made in earlier chapters (James Milroy, Davis) that linguists have tended to map their written language assumptions onto spoken language. Looking at the pedagogical outcomes of this, Carter suggests that 'spoken English continues to be judged by the codified standards of written English, and...teaching pupils to speak standard English may, in fact, be to teach them to speak in formal written English' (p. 158). Cheshire and Carter show some of the regular forms that emerge only or mainly in spoken language, including existential *there's* constructions with plural nouns ('There's lots of museums'), *you know x* constructions, 'fused constructions' that mix different clauses (Cheshire), headers and footers ('The women in the audience, they all shouted' or 'It's not actually very good is it, that wine?'), ellipsis, and double negatives (Carter). As Cheshire explains, the features of spoken English are often a result of the nature of spoken interaction; they 'are polypragmatic and multifunctional, responding to speakers' needs to plan simultaneously as they go; to take, keep or signal their intention to yield the floor; to present information in manageable chunks; to create interpersonal involvement; to introduce conversational topics ...' (p. 145).

This still leaves an important question unanswered, however: while it is clearly important to distinguish between spoken and written forms, why should we accord the term 'spoken standard English' (Cheshire, p. 129) 'standard spoken English'

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(Carter, p. 154) to the examples produced? The argument is roughly that these are forms produced by speakers who are 'educated' and since these speakers would normally produce different written forms, we can assume that these are alternative forms of spoken standard English. But this has some weaknesses. First, it does not establish any firm grounds for establishing what standard spoken language is. If standard written English has been critiqued as a particular ideological construction, do we want to merely assume that SSE is the language spoken by 'educated' speakers? Second, given the confusions surrounding meanings of SE, much more explicit work needs to be done to explain what is meant by SSE: is it, as Trudgill would have it, a dialect of English? Is it an alternative form of educated English? And given the permeability and interconnectedness of spoken and written forms of English, are we talking only about media (writing/speech) or, for example, registers? Rather than assuming, therefore, that the examples here are of standard spoken English, more complex questions might have been raised about the status of these notions of what is standard.

The third section of the book deals with contexts outside the UK. Lesley Milroy compares standard language ideology in the UK and USA. Focusing particularly on accent in spoken language (and taking therefore a position different from Trudgill's), she argues that while standard language ideology in the UK is an exclusionary, class-based ideology, in the USA it is a racially discriminatory ideology. Milroy shows how the historical construction of the notion of the standard language, as well as current debates about and denigrations of nonstandard language, are tied to British classism and United States' racism. Milroy's argument is similar to Lippi-Green's (1997) point that the standard is not just a reified social dialect, but rather an ideological construct against which deviance and difference are measured. To deviate from the standard is to be foreign, uneducated, criminal, deviant, and all those other characteristics that come with 'English with an accent'. Whereas Lippi-Green's focus is predominantly on the USA, however, Milroy's comparison demonstrates how the processes of Othering produced in standard language debates may be very different in different contexts.

Hartley and Preston's work takes a very different line from other work in this book by exploring everyday views on good and bad speech, what they call 'folklinguistics' or 'perceptual dialectology'. Although Bex makes a similar point about the importance of understanding popular beliefs about language (why have people been so absorbed by Partridge or Fowler?), Hartley and Preston's work actually researches the topic by asking people to draw dialect or accent maps of the USA. Their study shows, for example, that 'The South and the Northeast, particularly [New York City] and [New Jersey], are not, as linguists would have it, just other regions with their own local standards. Even to locals in the South, that region and the largest metropolitan area of the East Coast are the home bases of ''incorrect'' US English' (p. 236). These are interesting observations that foreground the need not only for informed discussion of standard languages and standard language ideologies, but also for research on standard language and popular culture.

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The lack of discussion in this chapter of the implications of this research, however, leaves its significance unclear.

What this chapter points to is the need to go beyond not only the simplistic universalism of arguments such as Quirk's that 'the existence of standards ... is an endemic feature of our mortal condition and ... people feel alienated and disoriented if a standard seems to be missing ...' (1985: 6), but also the argument in a large number of chapters in this book that it is the class and educational background of many linguists and other academics that accounts for their views on standard languages. Rather, we need to understand more profoundly the investments and desires tied up with particular views on language. Thus, while the book's final chapter (epilogue) by Crowley pulls apart the many weaknesses in Honey's arguments, we also need to face the question in more complex ways as to why such work is so popular. It is not enough to assume ignorance, shared educational and class background, or similar political orientation to explain why arguments about standard language have such appeal. And it is unlikely that an educational endeavour that seeks to enlighten people about the myths of standard English will be effective without engaging with people's investment in certain views on language. Cameron (1995) gets closer to these concerns by locating arguments about standard English, correctness, and so on within a broader domain of 'verbal hygiene'.

Preisler's chapter discusses attitudes towards and uses of English in Denmark. He distinguishes 'between ''English from above'' and ''English from below'', the former constituting the promotion of English by the hegemonic culture for purposes of ''international communication'' (primarily through formal education), the latter representing the informal – active or passive – use of English as an expression of subcultural identity and style' (p. 259). As an example of the latter, Preisler produces an extensive list of English words used by a hip-hop band in Denmark, from *head spin* to *cross-fader,* from *tagging* to *wanna-be*. At this point, however, Preisler retreats into a pragmatic argument for standard English in EFL classes: 'the form of English taught in an EFL country should be determined only by the degree in which it will enable non-native speakers to cope with the linguistic aspects of internationalisation as it affects their own lives' (p. 263); and this should be 'Standard English in its two major regional forms' (p. 264). He thus fails both to problematize the notion of SE and to draw more significant lessons from the point that Danish hip-hoppers are also engaging in English as part of internationalization. I shall return to these arguments later.

Broadening the debate

At the very least, this collection should have shed some light on both general questions about standard languages and more particular issues to do with standard English. It is moderately successful in doing so. It provides a lot of useful discussion about the construction of SE, of issues to do with spoken and written English, but it left me feeling dissatisfied. I wanted the editors and more of the contributors to

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really get their teeth into some underlying questions about standardization. I shall discuss three of these further: the question of whether we see SE as a construct, an idealization or a real thing; the issue of descriptivism, prescriptivism, and normativity; and the question of scope, particularly in the context of English as an international language.

That there is little agreement on what SE is may well be healthy, but more discussion of the nature of those differences would have been fruitful. There are those, such as Trudgill, for whom there seems little problem about the ontological status of SE: Standard English is a dialect of English, and a sentence such as 'The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip' can be described as 'clearly and unambiguously Standard English' (p. 120) while 'Father were very tired after his lengthy journey' (p. 121) is a sentence in a non-standard variety. For others, however, 'standard languages are fixed and uniform-state idealizations' (James Milroy, p. 18), and since standard languages are high-level idealizations, 'no one actually speaks a standard language' (p. 27). These are fundamentally different positions. They also differ from Carter's argument that SSE differs from the written version but can be described (with enough spoken language corpora to work on).

Other contributors point more to the notion of SE as a construction. Lesley Milroy's focus is on 'standard language ideology', which she views as 'a particular set of beliefs about language' (p. 173). This raises the question as to whether we see standard languages as real entities, idealizations, ideological fictions, or discursive constructions. A crucial distinction, then, that is not adequately explored concerns whether we take SE as a 'construction' to mean 1. that SE exists but does not do so by accident: it has been produced through particular social and historical processes; SE as a social and historical construction in this sense refers to the point that it did not emerge naturally but rather was made for particular purposes (though issues of intentionality can be put on hold here); 2. SE does not exist: it has been produced as a myth to maintain certain interests; the notion of construction here is more akin to 'fabrication'; or 3. SE exists but is surrounded by myths about its status and nature; in this case, rather than focusing on the mythical construction of SE, the focus is on myths about SE. These different positions are not just interesting in terms of the ontological status of SE, but also in terms of pedagogical implications.

The second set of issues has to do with description, prescription, and normativity. These are given reasonable coverage here but might have been taken further. James Milroy points to a deep irony in Honey's (1997) attack on linguists as enemies of standard English, since this 'is actually the opposite of the truth . . .': 'Through their authority their work contributes to the legitimacy of the standard variety; and they give no sign at all of opposing the standard language' (p. 26). A similar point has been made by Harris (1981) and Cameron (1995) amongst others. Given that the description/prescription dichotomy lies at the very heart of linguistics (like the arbitrariness of the sign, it's one of those truths taught at the beginning of linguistics classes), this is a major challenge. But is it really fair to tar linguists with the brush of prescriptivism? I would prefer to suggest that the problem lies in the dichotomization:

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if the only choice is nose-in-the-air prescriptivism or head-in-the-sand descriptivism, we are stuck. It is more useful to note that linguistics is frequently *normative* rather than prescriptive, and it is this apolitical normativity that is deeply problematic.

It is interesting to note in this context that David Crystal, who sings the praises of this book on the cover, is referred to by Bex as one of 'those linguists ... who continue within the prescriptivist tradition' (p. 107). Now Crystal would surely object deeply to such a description (did Crystal read this section before describing the book as 'a timely and significant contribution to the literature on this topic'?). Crystal's appreciation of the book seems to be principally in that it is 'grounded in historical, socio-linguistic and descriptive perspectives' as opposed to 'the simplistic accounts which have been prominent in recent years' (back cover comments). The latter comment, I suspect, may refer to the same conservative forces that this book overtly opposes. But whereas Crystal at this level would seem to be very much in accordance with the themes of this book, at another level, like many other linguists, he seems unable to think beyond description as the solution. As Phillipson (1999) has cogently argued, this failure to grasp the politics of language in Crystal's book on the global spread of English (1997) is a dangerous narrowness of vision.

Similarly, many linguists have failed to grasp that their views on the equality of languages are not 'innocent linguistic pronouncements'; rather they are 'overtly and deliberately ideological, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise' (James Milroy, p. 20). The point here, then, is that the linguistic pretension to be engaged in a 'science', or only in 'description', has been a major limitation on the possibility of understanding language more comprehensively. On the one hand, it has played into the hands of conservative critics such as Honey, who have been able to attack the liberal politics of linguistics more effectively than linguistics has been able to understand its own politics. As James Milroy argues, 'In debates about language use and language teaching, language experts seem often to have played into the hands of those who support narrowly ''correct'' usage by giving too little attention to the fact that what is involved is only superficially a debate about language and is more fundamentally a debate about ideologies' (p. 23). On the other hand, as Mühlhäusler (1996) has argued, because of their inadequate understanding of the contexts and politics of languages, linguists have been at times directly involved in the demise of exactly those objects they have hoped to describe and preserve. In order to think further about our roles as linguists and applied linguists in relationship to language, language maintenance, or language death, we need to get out of a reductionist descriptive/prescriptive divide.

The third issue is one of scope. Although my own interests in trying to understand questions of standardization within the global context of English might seem an unfair criterion by which to judge this book, I do not feel it is really adequate to produce a book about 'standard English' with such narrow horizons. As becomes evident from the introduction and many of the chapters, the arguments here are set against the conservative climate in Britain in the mid-1990s, and particularly the National Curriculum of 1995 and John Honey's book published in 1997. Indeed, at

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some level this book operates as a response to Honey's confused and misleading views on standard English. In addition to Crowley's pointed critique of *Language is power,* Honey is referred to in many of the chapters: a glance at the index shows that Honey is by far the most referred to writer in this book, way beyond Kachru, Quirk, Labov, Crystal, Pinker, and Chomsky put together. This has of course been an important battle to fight in the UK, but it does leave a reader outside this context frustrated. Perhaps the title of the book might have been more explicit.

Bex and Watts in their introduction do discuss the work of Kachru (e.g. 1986), but after that the issue of global English and standardization goes rather cold. For many of us who are trying to get beyond the rather limited apolitical pluralism of the 'world Englishes' paradigm (for a critique, see Parakrama, 1995), and to understand within a more postcolonial framework the pedagogical and political implications of English around the world, it is a shame that this book does not even start to address these concerns. The editors suggest, rather apologetically, that there wasn't space here for wide descriptions of newly emerging forms of English, and I would agree that given the large amount of work going on this area, we really don't need another description of Indian or Singaporean English. But I would have liked at least one chapter that discussed the immense implications and struggles over standardization around the world. As it is, the three chapters on 'perspectives from outside the UK' are disappointingly narrow. Lesley Milroy's and Hartley and Preston's chapters deal with the US; Preisler's with Denmark. Given that far more users of English are outside the USA and Europe, I would have liked more than just a nod to their presence in the introduction, especially in a book that claims to 'widen the debate'.

In addition, the comments that do deal with standard English and learners of English from other language backgrounds are disappointing. Trudgill, for example, suggests that Standard English is 'the variety taught to non-native learners' (p. 118). What does he mean by this? Where? By whom? To whom? If this comment indeed has some definitional status (it comes in a paragraph discussing Standard English as 'the variety normally used in writing' and 'the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as ''educated people''), then Trudgill may be casting his net very widely indeed. Given that a major source of debate in recent years has had to do with the whole status of the native/non-native speaker distinction (see e.g. Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999), which has major implications for whose version of standard English is taught in schools, as well as for issues such as native-speaker intuition, it seems to me to be a serious lacuna that this book does not even start to engage with such issues. The classist and racist Othering described by Lesley Milroy in the UK and US takes on a whole new complexion in the context of English round the world.

Preisler's article, furthermore, which is the only one that overtly deals with an EFL context, is disappointing. Preisler opens up scope for reflecting on English beyond the UK and US and then closes the door again by suggesting that it is British and American standard English that should be the core of EFL curricula. Preisler argues that unless British or American SE is taught in conjunction with associated pragmatic behaviours, English will not serve as a useful international

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language: 'With the evolution of a multiplicity of culturally autonomous Englishes, Standard English maintained as an instrument of cross-cultural communication will only be effective at the level of communicative competence to the extent that it is based on shared cultural assumptions' (p. 265). These arguments ignore a range of other interesting possibilities: 1. As Preisler's discussion of hip-hop English use in Denmark suggests, the configurations of culture, globalization and English are not usefully reduced to a monocultural domain of international English; 2. Regionalized and at least informally standardized versions of English are emerging around the world, and thus more interesting questions could be asked about emerging norms for Danish, Scandinavian, North European, or European English(es); 3. As a number of people have argued (e.g. Honna, 1999, for SE Asia), it is local pragmatic norms of communication that become attached to English: when Korean and Indonesian students communicate in English in a café in Sydney, British or American norms of language and culture are not significant; and 4. The emergence of some form of international English as a medium of communication appears to be a complex, negotiated space with an interesting degree of variety. These are issues to be explored, not dismissed.

Conclusion

In provocative mode, Parakrama (1995) suggests that 'in punishing ''error'' so brutally yet so selectively and in laying the blame elsewhere, or in saying in the appropriately subdued tone, ''what else can we do?'', the language teacher is pimping with a vengeance for the system while masturbating his/her conscience with this ''empowerment'' crap' (xii). The sentiment is a troubling one. The language is meant to shock. Is it standard English? Is this question worth asking? Like Parakrama, I have come to feel not only that we need to take into account the many varieties of English round the world, but that we need to start thinking very differently about what the issues are here. As he suggests, 'even the most liberal and sympathetic of linguists ... cannot do justice to these Other Englishes as long as they remain within the overarching structures that these Englishes bring to crisis' (p. 17). Despite some interesting contributions, the book under review here only widens the debate to the extent that it opposes conservative arguments within the UK. But like Parakrama, I feel we need to relocate these arguments within a very different way of thinking about language and politics, particularly drawing on postcolonialist scholarship.

For me, a conjunction between postcolonialism and Judith Butler's (1997) notion of 'performativity' (what I have called postcolonial performativity) starts to open up radical new ways of thinking about language, avoiding ontological and essentialist debates about whether standard English exists, what it is, or whether we should teach it, and instead looking to ways in which we perform identities through language choices amid competing social, cultural, and educational demands. This book has helped clarify some of the issues in the UK, but it generally either critiques (myths about SE) or describes (SSE) rather than reinvents. To broaden this debate

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in fruitful ways, we need not merely to include 'other Englishes' and the struggles over local norms of English round the world, but to learn from the different questions and confrontations these contexts demand. This is not, then, a question of pluralism, of accepting greater diversity within what is considered 'English', of continuing to judge the divergence of new Englishes from the central norms (as remains common in much of the writing on new Englishes), but rather of starting to listen to how the users of Other(ed) Englishes may help us reinvent, or *disinvent* in Makoni's (1999) terms, the whole notion of languages and their standards.

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