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Standard American English

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Abstract :

The definitions of Standard English are seemingly as numerous as experts in the field of the study of language. The study of English has led many a scholar down a complex and confusing path due to several reasons. The English language, unlike the languages of French, Spanish, and Dutch, does not have a governing body to establish usage (see Académie française, Real Academia Española, Dutch Language Union). (Wikipedia)

Secondly, English is now the most widely used second language in the world. Therefore, due to the lack of a governing body and the adaptation of the language throughout so many different countries and regions, it has now become subject to various rules and standards of those peoples. It is also worthy of consideration the attitude toward the English language of the common American people, those of the most powerful and possibly most influential nation in the world. Not only can a definition of Standard English not be agreed upon, but the fragile standard and integrity of the language is wavering as variations are constantly being deemed as acceptable in the name of embracing diversity.

Key words: Standard English, second language, American people, multitude of forms, global means of communication, global English, well educated, homogeneous professional English, difference in spelling, need of standard written English.

The English language, in the multitude of forms in which it exists today, has been forming for hundreds of years. English became a prevailing language throughout Great Britain in the Middle Ages and later in Ireland in the eighteenth century. At that time, Standard English was the dialect spoken by the ruling class, and therefore the formal definition was as such.

When the first American colony was established early in the seventeenth century, this began the separation in forms of English. Standard English in Britain was, at this time, still fairly undeveloped, not entirely solid; then, in North America, the people began to establish their own dialect, choices in spelling, and irregularities in pronunciation.

International English today embodies so many different forms, branded, as it seems, by the nation or culture in which it is spoken, that it must be referred to by the country name, hyphen, "English." This "International English," defined as "the concept of the English language as a global means of communication in numerous dialects," (Wikipedia) is also referred to as "Global English, World English, Common English, General English, or Standard English." Examples of these accepted forms and their variances include several throughout the British Isles such as British English, East

Anglian English, Manx English, Received Pronunciation, Welsh English; in the United States collectively called American English, it is even more further separated by region, such as California English, Mid-Atlantic English, Pacific-Northwest English, Boston English, Baltimorese, Chicano-English, and so forth. Several other countries have brands, or dialects of English such as Canadian English (further separated by regions), several Asian-English dialects, Australian English, Caribbean English, and far too many more to list.

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Most scholars are in agreement that Standard English is the English used and spoken by those well-educated. However, the definition of well-educated itself is under debate. So, the realm of what Standard English consists of is broadened; according to Dr. Tom McArthur, editor of The Oxford Companion to the English Language and of the journal English Today (CUP):

Very traditionally minded people use a regional limit: well-educated people in south-east England. Milder traditionalists have a national limit: people anywhere in Britain. Progressives and pragmatists tend to be expansive: such people throughout the English-speaking world and maybe beyond it, and maybe without the "well". And many people slide about on this scale too. (McArthur)

Dr. McArthur further points out perhaps the saving grace of Standard English:

Yet despite the problems there is good news. Many of the traditional norms of English are being maintained - on a vast scale and in terms of the technology that the 19th century valued so much. What keeps the professional use of English so uniform throughout the world is not the way we speak, or even write, but the way we print. The print standard is remarkably homogeneous - or homogenous - everywhere. (McArthur)

Fortunately for those with an interest in preserving standards in the English language, standards adhering to rules of proper usage, (for example verb agreement) formal written English can still be relied upon to deliver a certain quality and uniformity. When reading formal writings of English, one regularly cannot differentiate between a piece written in various cities throughout the United States. More frequently differences can be detected from country to country, such as a formally written document originating in Great Britain read by an American, or a document from Australia. In most cases, however, the most distinguishable difference is that of spelling. A commonly spelling difference known to most is the word spelled color in the United States is spelled colour in the United Kingdom. (In some English dialects, the writer would point out that a word is "spelt" differently.) In the United States, a building is broken down into levels, each referred to as a story. In Australia and Canada (among other nations) this level of a building is known as a storey. A common conflict in spelling is the ending of a verb that requires, in the United States, an "ize," and in other English-speaking countries, "ise."

Regardless of some different preferences relative to spelling, formal written English is well understood by any English speaking audience. Concern is warranted, however, by allowances in written English. A recent trend seen even in professional environments (bulletins in doctors' offices, city newsletters) is the mistake in the formation of a plural word. This is due to the misuse of the apostrophe. The correct plural form of the word baby is babies, not baby's. When using the apostrophe, this indicated the possessive form of baby, meaning that the direct object in the sentence (often the next word, but not always) should be a noun describing something that belongs to the baby. However, this is a mistake so often overlooked today that one must wonder if it is at all common knowledge that it is a mistake, and why. Perhaps, someday, among linguists and teachers of English, this will be an acceptable form of a plural word simply due to the fact that it is "commonly used." Although it caused much controversy, the word ain't was recently granted entrance into the dictionary. Making an introduction in 1778, the word an't eventually evolved into ain't, a contraction used for both "am not" and "are not." The word, in the 19th century, was "confronted with

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criticism for being a vulgarity used by lower classes, and not having set sequence of words from which it can be contracted." (Bartleby) This demonstrates that, although a word is not logical and often seen as a sign of ignorance in view of those who use it, the word has gained recognition as legitimate simply by the merit of being commonly used.

In more recent news, the Ebonics controversy has English language experts asking questions, struggling for answers, and in general, conflicted with the definition of what the English language is for different cultures. Is Ebonics, or "Black English," a language of its own, and should the public school system embrace it, or attempt to convert the students for whom this is a native language to speak what is more well known as Standard English? Steve Guthrie, a teacher in DeKalb County, Georgia, comments about the issue following the debate in Oakland, California, after the proposed introduction of Ebonics curriculum:

Is Standard English indispensable for communication? Hardly. Two machinists or two chemists -- or just two people waiting at the bus stop -- who speak Ebonics and Appaltonics, or Brooklonics and New Mexiconics, can communicate perfectly well if they listen to one another, much better in fact than the Oakland School Board and the media (standard speakers all) have managed to do. Is Standard English still a badge of membership, like an old-school tie? Apparently so. Personnel officers, like teachers, give the break to applicants who use what they consider standard forms. But isn't this the sort of thing Americans tend to associate with class-conscious societies (the old British public school dialect)? Is it really something we want to preserve? What about the need for a standard written language? Read any current grammar book; how much of it is necessary for effective communication? Would it be possible to write a grammar book based not on the usage of the handbook writing class but on the actual common elements of all our native dialects? Think about this last idea for a moment. If it bothers you, then you're probably a speaker of standard English, and now you have an inkling of how a non-standard speaker might feel about the present state of affairs. (Guthrie)

Guthrie further comments that Standard English ought to be used as a tool, not a weapon, implying disadvantages or discrimination toward ethnic groups or the common classes of the American people.

Indeed, America is the great melting-pot, a delicious smorgasbord of, and increasingly diverse, peoples and cultures, and in regard to the English language, dialects. In all fairness, the entire world, the global society, has become the owner of the English language and each group has tailored that language to become, in part, original and their own. This concept should thoroughly be embraced just as differences in dress, cuisine, and expression in the way of the arts are specific to a people. However, the maintenance of a Standard English, a true form of the language, a solid blueprint of structure with clear rules of what is correct and appropriate, is vital to the survival of the language. Otherwise, it is plausible to believe that someday, the world may once again be separated by language, and the inability to understand one another and effectively communicate. After all, the idea of the International language of English is not to construct a plethora of new borders, but to diminish barriers.

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