The Spread of English

7.2 Language policy.
Throughout the history of English the role of the government or of other powerful institutions on the shaping and the status of the language has become evident again and again. Before the spread of English beyond England and the Scottish Lowlands the use of the language as an everyday medium of communication depended very much on the territorial expansion of the Saxons. With the introduction of literacy and learning centers of cultural power and prestige began to develop, and they tended to exert relatively great influence on language attitudes among the more educated. In principle, the founding of monasteries and the program of translation into and writing in English as carried out by King Alfred is an early, important example of language policy in regard to English, one which effectively established the West Saxon variety and system of spelling as the OE written standard (cf. 3.4-5). In addition, it effectively distanced itself from Old Norse, which was employed almost exclusively in the spoken medium.

In the ME period there was first a switch from English to Latin and French as the languages of the state and/or of learning, a move which largely divorced English from use in the written domains. This, as well as the subsequent move back to English, were matters of language policy. Once English had once again come into use in the government, the varieties used in London gained so much in prestige because of their association with the state and other institutions such as commerce, printing, religion, and eventually education that they gradually took on the status of a standard (cf. chapters 5 and 6).

7.2.1 The emergence of General English (GenE). The social and political forces which were instrumental in shaping English in the period of spread, which is the focus of this chapter, may be partially explained by looking at two rather contrary currents, tradition and modernization. The former has to do with the more sedentary population in the predominately rural areas, what Samuels refers to as “conservative peripheral areas” (1972: 133). Here the traditional dialects, while not unchanging, developed relatively independently of the changes in the modernizing part of society. The greater lack of cultural and linguistic contact and mixing provided for greater stability and slower change, something which is typical of more isolated communities. The latter current, modernization, finds its expression in the newly forming urban communities whose population consisted of people from all the dialect areas of England. They were “innovating central areas” (ibid.) characterized by contact, both social and linguistic. This led to greater social and linguistic instability and therefore to the emergence of new forms and structural leveling.

Language policy was a central part of the latter process, but not its only element. The state and such important institutions as the church, the ever more indispensable schools and universities and the growing – and increasingly ungovernable – publishing sector pursued a sometimes explicit and sometimes more or less implicit program which selected and promoted English. This new variety was transmitted most prominently in educational contexts, which very often meant in the form of writing. While the grammar schools saw it as their brief to teach the classical languages, Greek and, above all, Latin, the medium of instruction was English. Printing, as we saw in chapter 5, was increasingly geared to the reading public, and that public read English and not Latin. The overall trajectory amounted to the extension of the language to more and more domains. Yet, as we have seen (chap. 6), this “program” had neither uniform nor uncontroversial goals as far as codification was concerned. Furthermore, there were equally multi-focused non-institutionalized forces of contact and mixing between people speaking the different dialectal forms of English. Despite the lack of agreement on numerous points the result is remarkably uniform: it is a variety which with a great deal of justification may be called General English (GenE). For there is much more that is common to the two than distinguishes them.

In the long run, widespread agreement on the vocabulary used, at least in the more public domains, and on the central grammatical categories arose and spread, most likely due to koinéization. This was also the case with spelling, for the printing revolution insured that orthography would be fairly uniform by the end of the 16th century though not as perfectly – some might say, pedantically – uniform as it was to become by the end of the 18th century. In spite of everything shared, the basic dichotomy within GenE between Standard English and non-standard General English remained, and remains, socially and linguistically significant. The former was increasingly used in published writing and, arguably in speech (cf. Cheshire 1999). Today it is the default variety in published writing. But in everyday spoken communication all over the English-speaking world non-standard forms are omnipresent. However – and this is the most important point – they are easily de-coded. They are, in the end, variants which speakers everywhere can understand, whether they decide to use them or not. You may or may not use double negatives and 3rd person singular don't as in It don’t look like nothing’s gonna happen, but you are hardly likely to
misinterpret it. The very existence of these two types of English reveals the essential difficulty in gaining universal acceptance of a single standard in the Anglophone world. It is instructive to look at some of the ways in which the development of GenE and that of the one or the other traditional dialect have diverged.

7.2.2 Grammatical gender in GenE and in traditional dialects. Evidence from West Country and Newfoundland dialects reveal how differently traditional non-standard forms have developed in comparison with their modern GenE counterparts. The latter today has only remnants of gender marking. A few instances of gender marking of the {-er/-or} vs. {-ess} type are used sporadically, and the feminine suffix is largely optional. In the pronoun system there is a human vs. non-human distinction as seen in the relative pronouns who vs. which. Within the human category a male vs. female distinction is made in the 3rd person singular of the personal pronouns he, feminine she, and neuter it generally according to natural gender (= sex). In addition to this GenE recognizes some special cases such as feminine reference, mostly on the part of men, to cars, boats, etc. So there is nothing strange about getting gas in North America and saying fill'er up.

In English West Country dialect a very different system has been maintained in which every object which has a shape of its own (dead or alive) is either masculine or feminine; nearly always the former, e.g. pitcher, tool, book, house, coat, cat, letter = be. In contrast, it is impersonal or abstract, used to express an action or a noun of the undefined sort, such as water, snow, air, weather, bay, beer. This is a basic count vs. mass distinction and may be traceable to Proto-Indo-European, where animate was masculine with the subcategory feminine for female humans and both stood in contrast to inanimate, which was neuter (Wagner 2004: 481f). In the traditional dialects of the West Country as well as that of Newfoundland, which was largely settled by people from the English Southwest, we find this system. The Survey of English Dialects (SED) contains the following examples from England:

\[\text{“just got a ‘boil ‘pod a ‘boil’ ap tu: }\text{an} \text{ an stirm an} \]
\[\text{“you got a boil, put a bottle up to it and steam it”; bottle referred to as an < OE bine (masc. sg. acc.)} \]
\[\text{ar ‘boz an} \quad \text{i: ‘vægl dæg mi ‘pokat} \]
\[\text{“I’ve lost it [a knife]; it fell thru my pocket”; knife referred to as nom. acc. (h)ine and nom. (h)er} \]
\[\text{dæt da kip ‘i: daun} \]
\[\text{“that keeps (he) [a cart] down”; replacement of object case him with subject case he (ibid.: 482f)} \]

The final example demonstrates case leveling, which also occurred in GenE, where object form you replaced subject form ye. In addition, it supplies us with an example of the auxiliary do /da/ used to mark habitual aspect, here in the sense that something always keeps the cart down.

Material collected more recently from the West Country as well as from Newfoundland shows a system with more mixing, where it is often used in object position while be is retained as a subject, cf. … when I saw the plough nobody valued it, if he had been kept dry he would have been good now (Somerset) and Oh yes he [a certificate] had to go in wid it [application for old age pension] see, he bad to go in wid en, now he won’t be, come back no more ’fore I gets 70, if I lives till dat (Newfoundland) (ibid.: 490ff). This Newfoundland example shows dialect mixing, as we clearly see in the parallel use of wid it and wid en. Furthermore, the use of non-3rd person present tense {s}, a further traditional dialect usage shows up here as well (see 7.2.3).

7.2.3 The present-tense verb inflection {s}. The use of non-3rd person {s} is not unknown in GenE, but tends to be restricted to such relatively fixed uses as A: Says who? B: Says I.

\[\text{“This is something he has to do.”} \]
\[\text{“Says you?”} \]
\[\text{“Says him.”} \]


Cheshire remarks on the variable use of present tense {s}, as seen in examples like I knows how to handle teddy boys; You knows my sister, the one who’s small; or They calls me all the names under the sun, don’t they? (1979: 52) in the vernacular English of Reading, England, which resembles the English Southwest. She remarks that this is a usage which must have been much more widely used. Accordingly the auxiliary do was invariably do, e.g. She cadged, she do (ibid.: 54), and the past was did, while the lexical verb do was invariably does /dutz/ in the present tense, as in we does things at school … (ibid.: 52) and done in the past, cf. Well, he never

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1 For the reader who is uncertain, this sentence might be paraphrased as StE: It appears as if nothing is going to happen.
done it, did he? (ibid.: 57). In Cheshire’s study the effect of the gender of the speaker is emphasized: “tough” young people, esp. boys who were associated with the vernacular culture, were more likely to use the traditional forms: "...vernacular speech in adolescents is controlled by the norms of the vernacular culture, as embodied in the behaviour of the peer group" (ibid.: 63). Now while this pattern, which also distinguishes lexical has from auxiliary have, is distinctly different from GenE, it is not so strange as to make comprehension overly difficult. In fact, in the case of auxiliary do, negative 3rd person singular don’t is widespread wherever GenE is spoken. In findings like those illustrated by these studies we see the effect of covert norms on the non-standard traditional dialect and non-standard GenE usage.

The interesting point in this context of this chapter is that the kind of English which was exported as the language spread was the General English that had become established in the southeast of England, most especially in London. The transplantation of forms such as those from the English Southwest was definitely less common. GenE was the result of both overt and covert processes. The emerging grammatical system of GenE seems to have been widely adopted in the public sphere, be it government, the schools, the church, publishing, or the commercial sector. It had verb forms, pronouns, noun inflections, prepositions, adverb and adjective forms, and word order which differed, if at all, only in matters of detail in its non-standard as opposed to its standard forms. The more widely diverging systems as seen in the gender categories of the West Country or those 2nd person singular personal pronouns which retained a distinct singular form such as thou (see chap. 6), are not part of the new GenE.

**Literature**


