Chapter one: The English language: standards and variation

1.1 STANDARD ENGLISH

There is little explicit agreement about just how StE should be regarded. Almost everyone who works with English assumes at least implicitly that it exists, but the descriptions made of it - for example, in dictionaries and grammar books, to say nothing of manuals of style - indicate that there is a certain amount of diversity in people's ideas about StE. Yet, there are dictionaries, grammars, and manuals of style, and what they document - some would say: prescribe - is what is most often understood by StE (see below 1.3 and 1.4).

A standard language is used as a model in the speech community at large. In 1.3 you will read about four defining characteristics involved in the process of standardization: selection, acceptance, elaboration and codification. That this is necessary is evident in the cases of so many indigenous languages in Third World countries (see chapter 14) which for lack of a native standard have adopted a standardized European language such as English, hoping in this way to ease the path to 'economic prosperity, science and technology, development and modernization, and the attractions of popular culture' and paying the price of loss of self-expression and diminishment in feelings of cultural worth (Bailey 1990: 87). The result is that 'the old political empire with its metropolis and colonial outposts has nearly disappeared, replaced by a cultural empire of "English-speaking peoples"' (ibid.: 83). This quotation indicates that codification can also be overdone if English becomes the instrument of cultural imperialism. In order for English to occupy a more deeply rooted position within post-colonial societies it must draw on the everyday usage of its speakers, and this includes the recognition not only of non-standard forms, but also of non-native ones. While this is a current which moves contrary to StE, it is also one which is likely to invigorate English world-wide and make it more flexible.

To look at it from another angle, StE is 'the kind of English which draws least attention to itself over the widest area and through the widest range of usage' (Quirk 1990: 123). It is most clearly associated with the written language, perhaps because what is written and especially what is published is more permanent and is largely free of inadvertent slips and is transmitted in spelling, which is far more standardized than pronunciation is. Compare the relatively few AmE - BrE differences in orthography (chap. 12), but the numerous national and regional accent standards (chapters 4, 10 - 14). Two criteria may be set to establish what 'draws least attention to itself' over the widest geographic spread and stylistic range. For one, there is the criterion of educated usage, sometimes broadened to include common usage and probably to be most reasonably located somewhere between the two (see 1.4). The other criterion is appropriateness to the audience, topic, and social setting. However these criteria are finally interpreted, there is a well established bias towards the speech of those with the most power and prestige in a society. This has always been the better-educated and the higher socio-economic classes. The speech - however varied it may be in itself - of the middle class, especially the upper middle class, carries the most prestige: it is the basis for the overt, or publicly recognized linguistic norms of most English-speaking societies. This is not to say that working class speech or, for example, what is called Black English (see chapters 10 and 11) are without prestige, but these varieties represent hidden or covert norms in the groups in which they are current. Not to conform to them means to distance oneself from the group and its dominant values and possibly to become an outsider. Language, then, is a sign of group
identity. Public language and the overt public norm is StE (see 9.2.3 for more on overt and covert norms).

Although a great deal of emphasis has been put on what StE is, including lists of words and structures often felt to be used improperly (see 1.2), it is perhaps more helpful to see how language use is standard. One useful view is that accommodation is what makes language usage standard as speakers communicate in a manner which is (1) socially appropriate (whether middle class or working class), (2) suitable to the use to which the language is being put (1.6.2 'Register'), and (3) clear. Comments on points (1) and (2) have been made above, and these are important criteria underlying the description of StE in the first section of this book. This means that while we recognize the effects of the varying characteristics of users as well as the diverse uses to which the language is put, let us state explicitly that we have oriented ourselves along the lines of educated usage, especially as codified in dictionaries, grammars, phonetic-phonological treatments, and a wide assortment of other sources. In doing this we are more Anglo-American than Antipodean, more middle than working class, and look more to written than spoken language (except, of course, in the treatment of pronunciation and spoken discourse).

The third criterion listed above, clarity, is often evoked. Its loss, and the resultant demise of English, is often lamented by popular grammarians and their reading public. This is best treated in connection with the question of language attitudes.

1.2 LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

Language can be evaluated either positively or negatively, and the language which is judged may be one's own, or that of one's own group, or it may be that of others. It may be spoken or written, standard or non-standard, and it may be a native, a second or a foreign language variety. Whatever it is, an evaluation is usually reached on the basis of only a few features, very often stereotypes which have been condemned, or stigmatized, as 'bad' or have been stylized as 'good'. And because language is such an intimate part of everyone's identity, the way people regard their own and others' language frequently leads to feelings either of superiority or of denigration and uncertainty.

These feelings are strengthened by the attitudes prevalent in any given group. Sometimes a whole group can be infected by feelings of inferiority. It is reported, for example, that 'there is still linguistic insecurity on the part of many Australians: a desire for a uniquely Australian identity in language mixed with lingering doubts about the suitability and 'goodness' of [AusE]' (Guy 1991: 224). Many Australians seem to feel that a middle class British or Cultivated Australian accent is somehow better, and they rate speakers with a Broad AusE accent less favourably in terms of status and prestige though more highly as regards solidarity and friendliness (Ball 1989: 94). In England the attitudes people have towards RP ('Oxford English', 'the Queen's English') vary from complete identification including all sorts of attempts at emulation to rejection of it as a 'cut-glass accent' or as talking 'lah-di-dah' (Philp 1968: 26).

Few people would hold up RP as a world-wide model and most seem to accept the many different English pronunciations used, hoping to understand them, joking about unexpected or odd differences, yet inadvertently judging people's character by the attitudes which these accents call forth. Matched-guise tests, for example, have revealed many such attitudes. In these tests people are asked to judge the features of people on the basis of accents. In reality the same person has been recorded rendering a standardized text with various accents. The
intention is to eliminate the effect of individual voice quality by using the same voice in each guise. Although there is the danger that such speakers will, in some cases, unwillingly incorporate mannerisms not attributable to accent and thus prevent a fair comparison, the results have revealed such things as the tendency of English speakers in England to associate speakers of RP with intelligence, speakers of rural accents with warmth and trustworthiness, and speakers of non-RP urban accents with low prestige (with Birmingham at the bottom). GenAm speakers enjoy relatively much prestige in England, but are rated low on comprehensibility. In the United States network English (GenAm) - the variety most widely used in national newscasting - has high prestige; Southern accents, in contrast, have little standing outside the South; Black English has negative associations for whites. On American television British accents have increasingly replaced German ones for evil and/or highly intelligent characters in science fiction programmes. The list could easily be continued.

With the enormous variety of feelings and the strength they often have, it is natural to ask where all this comes from. Fundamentally, attitudes are anchored in feelings of group solidarity or distance. It is normal to identify with one's own group; therefore, what is really curious is why some people have such negative attitudes towards the speechways of their own group. To a large extent this is the result of the explicit and implicit messages which are constantly being sent out in the name of a single set standard. When this standard came into being in the centuries after 1600, it was the upper-class, educated usage of southern England that was adopted. The force of the Court, the Church, the schools, and the new economically dominant commercial elite of London stood behind it, and it was supported by the authority of a huge and growing body of highly admired prose (above all the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible of 1611). To belong to this privileged elite, it was felt that a command of "proper" language was necessary. This led to increasing codification and to the growth of a new class of grammarians who prescribed the standard. In this atmosphere keeping the standard became and still remains something of a moral obligation for the middle class and those who aspire to it; the bible of this cult is the dictionary; its present-day prophets ('pop grammarians' such as Edwin Newman and Richard Mitchell, but also the authors of popular manuals of style such as the Burchfield or Gower in Great Britain or Wilson Follett in the United States) condemn the three 'deadly sins'; improprieties, solecisms, and barbarisms.

"Improprieties" chiefly concern similar words which historically had distinct meanings, but which are commonly used as if identical. Most people, for example, use disinterested as if it were an alternate form of uninterested. Imply and infer, flaunt and flout, lie and lay, and many other pairs are often no longer distinguished in the way they once were. In a similar vein, hopefully as a sentence adverb (e.g. Hopefully, you can follow this argument) is widely attacked (see 12.4.1). Some of the many improprieties often named are malapropisms which are due to ignorance or carelessness, but others are fully in the current of a changing language, which dictates that when enough (of the 'right') people are 'wrong', they are right (Safire quoted in McArthur 1986: 34).

Solecisms comprise what is felt to be violations of number concord (A number of people are in agreement), the choice of the "wrong" case for pronouns (It's him; or: ...between you and I) and multiple negation (They don't have none). These are all phenomena which somehow are considered to have to do with logic. A singular pronoun such as everyone is said to logically demand continued reference in the singular (Everyone forgot his/her lines). But there is just as much logic in recognizing the "logical" plurality of everyone "all people"; hence why not, Everyone forgot their lines? (see 9.1). The point is that an appeal to logic is not enough. Most people accept and use That's me (say, when looking at an old photograph of themselves) rather than the grammatically "logical," but unidiomatic That's I; yet educated people would
be hesitant to use multiple negatives (*Nobody didn't do nothing*) except in jest although they have no trouble understanding them. Multiple negation is, to put it directly, socially marked; it is non-standard. In this case the purist’s idea of good English is also in line with what this book considers to be StE.

“Barbarisms” include a number of different things. They may be foreign expressions deemed unnecessary. Such expressions are regarded as fully acceptable if there is not a shorter and clearer English way to the meaning or if the foreign terms are somehow especially appropriate to the field of discourse (*glasnost, Ostpolitik*). *Quand même* for *anyhow* or *bien entendu* for *of course*, in contrast, seem to be pretentious (cf. Burchfield 2002). But who is to draw the line in matters of taste and appropriacy? Other examples of “barbarisms” are archaisms, regional dialect words, slang, cant and technical or scientific jargon. In all of these cases the same questions ultimately arise. A skilled writer can use any of these “barbarisms” to good effect, just as avoiding them does not make a bad writer any better.

Descriptive linguists, in contrast to the prescriptive grammarians, or purists, just treated, try to do precisely what the term indicates: describe. The aim is to discover how the language is employed by its users whatever their gender, age, regional origins, ethnicity, social class, education, religion, vocation etc. Explicit evaluations are avoided, but implicit ones, centred on educated middle class usage are almost always present, since this provides the usual framework for reference and comparison. It is in this tradition that this book has been written.