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THE WAY WE SPEAK

What Is Standard English?

(Written for "The Listener" by PROFESSOR IAN A. GORDON)

IN recent weeks the correspondence columns of *The Listener* have had many letters from enraged English residents and angry New Zealanders on the pronunciation of English in this country. Do we speak Standard English? Do we want to speak Standard English? Is there a New Zealand English? What, after all is Standard English? Should we say *Mundi* or *Mon-day*? The answer, let it be said, is not in Daniel Jones or Webster or the Oxford Dictionary, as so many correspondents assume, but in the whole history of the way in which Standard English has developed. "Standard English" is of comparatively recent growth. It was not, after all, spoken by Shakespeare or by Swift or by Keats or by Matthew Arnold.

The truth is that Standard English has always been the language of the dominant group in England. When "English" came to England in the fifth century, it came as three Germanic dialects spoken by the Jutes (who settled in Kent), the Saxons (who settled mainly in the south-west or "Wessex"), and the Angles (who settled the country from the Forth in the north to the Thames in the south). Though the English of the fifth century is now a foreign language, which has to be learned like any other foreign tongue, these three dialect divisions and their geographical dispersal are with us to the present day. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Standard English was the English of the Angles. Politically and culturally they were the dominant group, and all our earliest poetry like the epic of *Beowulf* was written in the speech of the area which is now round Newcastle.

By the ninth century political power had shifted to Wessex, and the Standard English of the years between 900 and 1000 was West-Saxon, the speech of Alfred the Great. Anglian and Kentish sank to the status of mere dialects. Virtually all the literature of the period that has survived was written in West-Saxon — even *Beowulf* was translated from its original Anglian, and exists now only as a West-Saxon poem. Traces of West-Saxon are to be found even at the present-day — the word *bury*, for example, we pronounce with the pronunciation of Chaucer, but we spell it in the pronunciation of Alfred.

A Close Thing for London

By the end of the medieval period the kingdom of Alfred was a thing of the past, and his language, too, had sunk to the level of a dialect. By 1400, London was the centre of England. The Court was there. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been established within easy reach. Chaucer and Gower had spent their life there and written their great work in its language. And so the South-Eastern dialect (made up of the old Jute dialect of Kent and the Anglian dialect of the South-East Midlands) of the London area became for the 15th century

Standard English. Geographically speaking, this South-East English dialect has remained the basis of Standard English down to the present day. But the victory of London was a close thing. While Chaucer was writing, a great school of poets were striving hard to establish the language of the West of England as the dominant speech, and they nearly succeeded, Round Malvern way William Langland was writing *Piers Plowman*; up near the present site of Liverpool a great anonymous poet was composing the masterly romance *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Had economics favoured the west (if America and fast transport had been discovered in time!) we should all be speaking to-day the language of Stanley Holloway and Gracie Fields and slyly laughing at the uncultured country accents of the BBC announcers. But the South-East dialect won and became Standard English, and the other 10 English dialects remained mere dialects, which have from time to time lent a rich expressive word to the Standard tongue, but which have never since raised themselves in the world.

A Class Dialect

Standard English is a regional dialect. But it is more than that. It is also a class dialect, the language spoken by the educated classes in the South of England particularly, and to a somewhat lesser extent in the remainder of the British Isles. The Professor of English Language at the University of Oxford (as he says, "at the risk of offending certain susceptibilities") defines Standard English as "Good English, Well-bred English, Upper-class English... if we were to say that it is Public School English, we should not be far wrong." All variations from this Standard speech (discounting purely local dialects like Broad Scots or Zimmersets) are defined as Modified Standard... the typical educated man or woman from Manchester or Newcastle or Glasgow or Cardiff tends to speak Modified Standard and not Standard English.



There are no statistics available, because the research work on the problem has never been carried out, but I think it is true to say that Standard English is to-day even in England itself the speech of a minority of the population. But it is still as it has always been, the speech of the dominant group.

Overseas English

The development of English has not ceased with the development of Standard English. From the English of the 16th and 17th centuries, transported across the Atlantic and so no longer sharing in the development of the tongue in England, has grown American English. The time is long past when we can regard American as an inferior brand of English. It is not English.

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