
The printed word in the English- speaking world

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A discussion of the role of print in defining and sustaining International Standard English



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IN 1620, Sir Francis Bacon – English courtier, *littérateur*, philosopher, and scientific investigator – made the following observation in his influential but nowadays little-known work the *Novum Organon* ('New Instrument', i.e. the scientific method):

Vim et virtutem et consequentias rerum inventarum notare juvat; quae non in aliis manifestius occurrunt, quam in illis tribus quae antiquis incognitae, et quarum primordia, licet recentia, obscura et ingloria sunt: Artis nimirum Imprimendi, Pulveris Tormentarii, et Acus Nauticae. Haec enim tria rerum faciem et statum in orbe terrarum mutaverunt.

[It is worth noting the power, significance and effect of inventions, nowhere more easily seen than in three which were unknown to the ancients and, despite their newness, have obscure and humble origins: the Art of Printing, Artillery Dust (gunpowder), and the Mariner's Needle (the magnetic compass). These three have changed the face and form of things throughout the world.]

It is also worth noting that Bacon, a contemporary of Shakespeare's, wrote this book in Latin because he wished it to be read by his peers throughout Western Christendom. There would have been no international readership if

he had written in English, an offshore tongue with far less prominence or promise than Italian, French, and Spanish. Nowadays, however, few people educated to university level anywhere in the world know Latin (well or at all), and it is ironic that, if the *Novum Organon* is to be widely understood today, it must be re-cast in the mother tongue that Bacon chose not to use.

His above remarks are relevant in our time not only because of their content but also because the subsequent fate of Latin should make us cautious about what can happen to prestige languages. Bacon was an optimist about his 'new instrument' but a pessimist – or at least a realist – about circulating his views in the most effective language available: English could not outshine Latin, even though it had already – in the wake of Portuguese and

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Spanish – gone round Africa to Asia, and crossed the Oceanus Atlanticus to the Novus Mundus. He might also have guessed that, if the mysterious Terra Australis really existed, English would get there too, but such an awareness of its recent adventures did not tie in with his traditional learning, which told him – reasonably enough, but wrongly – that the language which named all these exotic places was a grander and more polished international medium than his own tongue would ever be.

It was left to a less well-known contemporary to dream dreams about the future of English: the now almost forgotten poet Samuel Daniel, who published in 1599 a long poetic work with the Latin title *Musophilus* ('Lover of the Muses', i.e. the Arts) and the English subtitle 'Containing a general Defense of Learning'. The book, written resolutely in English, contains the following question:

And who in time knowes whither we may vent
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange
shores
This gaine of our best glorie shal be sent,
T'enrich vnknowing Nations with our stores?

These lines, with their prophetic and oddly triumphalist ring, have been prominently quoted in at least three late 20th-century publications:

- *English as a World Language*, a collection of papers edited by Richard W. Bailey (of the University of Michigan) and Manfred Görlach (of the University of Köln, Germany), and published in 1982
- 'The idea of World English', an article by Richard Bailey in the first issue of the journal *English Today*, in 1985
- *The Story of English*, a book by Robert McCrum (a British author and publisher), William Cran (a British TV producer and journalist working in Canada and the US), and Robert MacNeil (a Canadian broadcaster working in the US), partnering the ground-breaking television series of the same name, in 1986.

For these writers, Daniel's lines constitute a kind of charter statement for everything that has happened to the language since his time: a prescient vision (even if it is couched as a question) at a point when a world role for this vernacular was hard to imagine and hardly guaranteed.

Neither Bacon nor Daniel foresaw the long sunset of Latin, or the conditions in which English would achieve a wider distribution and a

greater influence than the language of caesars and popes. The three inventions that Bacon refers to have all been involved in its progress: probably more has been printed in English than in any other language, while explosives and the compass played a major part in building an empire that stretched from Glasgow in Scotland, where I was born, to Adelaide in Australia, where an earlier version of this paper was presented in the only kind of publication that the Romans ever knew – one's handwritten thoughts made public by reading them out loud in a forum.

The power of technology

Four centuries after *Musophilus*, there is a vast but indeterminate concourse of users of English on every continent and in every ocean, whose styles of language range from the virtually identical (such as British, American, and Australian standard usage) to the mutually unintelligible (as with Scots in Europe, Jamaican Patwa in the Americas, and Tok Pisin in Asia-Pacific). We do not know precisely who all the users – consumers? – of English are these days, but we do know that the non-natives now outnumber the natives and that well over 500 million and probably more than a billion people are engaged with this language in some form or other: from interacting on the Internet in the first world to begging on the streets of the third. McCrum *et al* in *The Story of English* (Second Edition, 1992) put the matter as follows:

The English language surrounds us like a sea, and like the waters of the deep it is full of mysteries. Until the invention of the gramophone and the tape-recorder there was no reliable way of examining everyday speech... The music of our language eludes transcription. Similarly, written English has always been the preserve of the educated minority, and gives us tantalizingly few clues about the English of earlier centuries. English is – and always has been – in a state of ungovernable change.

The writers' maritime metaphor – English as mysterious sea – sits well with Bacon's allusion to mariners and their needles, and mention of the gramophone and the tape recorder reminds us of the printing press. Technological change has an enormous impact on language: how we use it, perceive it, and report on it. This year, for example, the personal computer has

allowed me first of all to produce and then print out lecture notes which I could develop by hand on the plane from London and in my Adelaide hotel, then in due course send a final version in electronic and printed formats from Cambridge to Sydney, to be incorporated by further electronic manipulations into the proceedings of Style Council.

McCrum and his colleagues observe, above, that written English has always been the preserve of an educated minority with great influence over everyone else, and that is true. But within that minority there has for five centuries been a further minority – the gatekeepers of print – who since Gutenberg's day, and as Bacon implies, have held immense power over all other users of English or indeed any 'modern' language. Although the printed word is generally subsumed under the written word the matter is not so simple. The power of the gatekeepers goes far beyond a capacity to write with a pen or tap something out on a typewriter or keyboard. As Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued in her seminal work, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), and as I have maintained in *Worlds of Reference* (1986), print is more – and other – than writing. It is a step beyond it, just as writing was a step beyond speech, and just as today electronic text is a step beyond traditional print.

To be 'modern' in language terms means to be typographically validated: not by the typographers themselves (who by and large have simply done as they were told), but by the publishers and editors who decide on the 'print-worthiness' of ideas, reports, stories, and the like, then give the typographers and binders the go-ahead. The paradox is that such lords of print have seldom themselves been able to run the presses, or even in recent times been able to type, but they have nonetheless supervised the processes by which mental, spoken, and written language has been transformed – ?elevated – into print. Once upon a time, for a language to be writable was enough but, increasingly over five hundred years, this has been a necessary but not a sufficient condition for true sociolinguistic power and prestige.

Serious literacy – together with the standardization of 'high' languages – has long since gone beyond handwriting into such filtering and polishing processes as the editing and reviewing of text (initially hand- or type-written), these processes conducted largely

within publishing-cum-printing houses whose cultural and commercial hierarchy ranges from sidestreet publishers of limited means to the collegiate prestige of Oxford and Cambridge, on the one hand, and the social potency of such largescale commercial operators as Time-Life and HarperCollins, nowadays increasingly tied in with TV, radio, and other media networks, on the other.

Today, the computer keyboard and the laser printer (among other devices) are amending this entrenched procedure in various radical, even paradoxical ways. On the one hand, the new technological developments extend – and to some degree democratize – the membership, nature, and power of the print élite in ways that were unimaginable even twenty years ago, making the directly printed products of typing-cum-keyboarding ever more like finished text of a publishable standard. On the other hand, however, these developments have let loose an anarchy of prose styles along the information superhighway (and elsewhere) which bears little resemblance to the demure business of traditional typing and printing.

Even so, however, despite the contradictions and confusions, to be postmodern in the 1990s means that people must be electronically literate global villagers: a McLuhanesque state of affairs that puts pressure on all printable languages.

The globalization of English

Although there is nothing simple about the nature and growth of English around the world, one fairly economical and straightforward set of categories has served linguists and teachers well in the last quarter of a century: a tripartite model first described in print, as far as I know, in 1970 by Barbara Strang, Professor of English Language and General Linguistics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England:

At the present time, English is spoken by perhaps 350 to 400m people who have it as their mother tongue. These people are scattered over the earth, in far-ranging communities of divergent status, history, cultural traditions and local affinities. I shall call them A-speakers, because they are the principal kind we think of in trying to choose a variety of English as a basis for description. The principal communities of A-speakers are those of the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. There are many millions more for whom

English may not be quite the mother tongue, but who learnt it in early childhood, and who lived in communities in which English has a special status (whether or not as an official national language) as a, or the, language for advanced academic work and for participation in the affairs of men at the international, and possibly even the national level. These are the B-speakers, found extensively in Asia (especially India) and Africa (especially the former colonial territories). Then there are those throughout the world for whom English is a foreign language, its study required, often as the first foreign language, as part of their country's educational curriculum, though the language has no official, or even traditional, standing in that country. These are the C-speakers.

– *A History of English*, pp. 17-18.

A more influential variant of Strang's classification was published two years later by Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum (of University College London), Geoffrey Leech (of the University of Lancaster, England), and Jan Svartvik (of the University of Lund, Sweden), the four editors of *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1972). They put the matter as follows, but without using letters of the alphabet and with a lower estimate of the world's population of native English-speakers:

English is the world's most widely used language. It is useful to distinguish three primary categories of use: as a *native* language, as a *second* language, and as a *foreign* language. English is spoken as a native language by nearly three hundred million people (p. 3).

The tripartite model was widely adopted by English-language professionals, in the course of whose work the categories have become known as *English as a Native Language* (contracted to *ENL*), *English as a Second Language* (*ESL*), and *English as a Foreign Language* (*EFL*). Commentators since then have usually referred to *ENL*, *ESL*, and *EFL countries*, but my own preference is *territories*, because it permits the inclusion of localities that, while not necessarily politically independent, are nonetheless linguistically significant and may indeed often be self-governing, such as Gibraltar (a British colony) and Puerto Rico (a commonwealth in association with the United States).

Because, however, each territory has its own unique language profile, the tripartite model – despite its rule-of-thumb usefulness – is not delicate enough to handle the sheer variety of English. There are, for example,

many *ESL/EFL* users in the *ENL* territories, and vice versa, and it is often not easy to decide whether native speakers of the more opaque dialects, creoles, and nativized foreign varieties are 'really' speakers of English in the sense that many foreign learners – used to highly standardized materials – are not able (and perhaps cannot be prepared) to cope with them. In addition, a vast range of usage, while resembling the models of English offered in carefully constructed texts and tapes, etc., to learners of all kinds, differs from them to greater or less degrees, as for example the myriad usages of such cities as London and New York. All such varieties, however valid they may be within their own communities, are seldom closely attuned to the internationally viable norms which people everywhere – speakers of dialects, creoles, nativized varieties, and regional mainstream forms alike – regard as 'real', high-class English: in effect the usage of a relatively small and often highly trained minority often employed in the communication and education industries.

International Standard English

In the 1990s, this 'real' English is a global phenomenon, used or sought after in universities, corporate headquarters, media outlets, and such institutions as the United Nations Organization. It is not owned by any one *ENL* territory, tied to any one accent, or subject to any single code of practices, but it manifestly exists, and can for convenience be called 'International Standard English' (*ISE*). It is not possible here to go into detail about what exactly present-day 'Standard English' consists of at its various local, national, and international levels and in its spoken, written, and printed aspects, or to discuss just how the term, the concept, and the reality came into existence over the last four centuries, but it may be useful here to point to three key aspects of this complex and difficult subject:

1 The term standard

This term as it applies to language is not very old. It is the present-day version of a medieval Latin-cum-French-cum-English word which at first referred to such things as flags and weights and measures and later, in the 18th century, to language. The phrase *standard*

English (with or without an initial capital *s*) dates from the Industrial Revolution (c.1830), when 'good' language began to be compared to such things as the regularized gauges of railway tracks, yardsticks, industrial and scientific units, and the like, as in *standard gauge*, *standard yard*, and *standard atmosphere*. The term *standard English* did not become common until the early 20th century, and the concept which it enshrines continues to be hotly discussed by scholars, educationists, politicians, and others.

2 *Standard languages and print*

It is difficult – perhaps impossible – to conceive of a standard language without bringing in the process of printing, which by the end of the 19th century was a fully industrialized activity available to all the languages of the world, many of them with their own ancient scribal heritages. Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic, Mandarin and other classical-cum-literary languages have had orthographies and canonical forms for centuries, even millennia, but these were not rigorously systematized and standardized until the move from chirography to typography took place.

3 *Validation through print*

The standard forms of modern languages are taught not so much through speech or even writing (although that is important) as through textbooks, dictionaries, and other print products. The norms of present-day literacy radiate from such materials, and as a result – regardless of television and telecommunications – such standard usage continues to find its most approved and even revered form in print alone. An example is this 'paper', which was first read out – and orally embroidered – at Style Council in Adelaide, then 'fixed' (to use a term popular in the 18th century) or 'validated' (to use a post-modernist term) through its appearance in a printed volume called a 'proceedings'.

Indeed, Style Council itself might lack validation if no print version emerged from its annual incarnations, and some of its speakers might not be sure about taking part if they did not get a listable 'publication' at the end. Finally, if there were no officially published outcome, some presenters (feeling that a printed end-product was desirable for their careers or for some other reason) would look for an outlet elsewhere, in a journal or newsletter.

A less immediately obvious but more potent example of the power of print is what the British phonetician David Abercrombie in 1959 called *spoken prose*: prose that is presented as speech, as when an actor utters memorized lines from a play, or someone gives a public address, or presenters use scripts on stage, screen, radio, and television. This term distinguishes all such speech from spontaneous, unscripted conversation. Abercrombie puts it as follows:

Prose is essentially language organized for visual presentation... Most people believe that *spoken prose*... is at least not far removed, when well done, from the conversation of real life... But the truth is that nobody speaks at all like the characters in any novel, play or film. Life would be intolerable if they did; and novels, plays or films would be intolerable if the characters spoke as people do in life. Spoken prose is far more different from conversation than is usually realized.

– *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics*, 1965.

Spoken prose derives from drama, lectures, and disputation, the recitation of more or less memorized poetry, and the arguments of lawyers and orators (whose rhetorical craft originated in ancient Greece). Although conversation is distinct from it, spoken prose influences educated and formal spoken usage. Speakers often use the same devices whether they are speaking spontaneously, using a script, or working from notes and a great deal of what passes for speech on radio and especially television (with the use of teleprompts) is print being read aloud, or writing and print that has been memorized (at least in part) – or *ex tempore* speech that, through years of practice, is structured in much the same way as printed text.

The sentences I used in the *ex tempore* parts of my delivery in Adelaide were more relaxed than those I read out, but by and large they had the same 'high' syntactic style and social flavour, and belonged to the same academic register. Indeed, a great deal of oral academic output is spoken prose, in the sense that it relates to the innumerable printed works that scholars have variously assimilated over the years.

Five standards

There appear to be several distinct strands to the complex rope of standardness, whether it is

at the local, national, regional, or global level. Thus, one can create a model of such standardness which consists of at least five overlapping and inter-operating sociolinguistic elements, each of which can be called a standard in its own right. These are: a print standard; a media standard, with a continuum of print, print-derived speech ('spoken prose'), and relaxed spontaneous speech; a governmental, administrative, and legal standard; a commercial and technological standard; and an educational standard. We can take them each in turn.

1 *The international print standard*

This has slowly emerged over some four centuries, from such works as the King James Bible and Shakespeare's First Folio in early 17th-century England. This form has in the process changed greatly, both as regards grammar and lexis and in terms of the conventions of typography, spelling, punctuation, and page layout. It is currently a composite of several national print standards, of which England (from c.1603), the United Kingdom and Ireland (from c.1707), and the United States (from c.1783) have been the trend-setters and arbiters. The UK and the US continue to be the bedrock influences, primacy passing after the Second World War from the UK to the US in terms of sociopolitical power and population size, but not in terms of the quantity of printed materials produced, in which the UK still leads. Towards the close of the century, however, other centres of actual and potential autonomy have been emerging: pre-eminently Australia, with its dictionaries, style manuals, and Style Council, then Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, with stirrings in India, Singapore, and the Caribbean (notably in the media and linguistics and in lexicographical description). Despite such diversity and occasional adjustments in the international pecking order of Englishes, the worldwide norms for print are remarkably uniform.

2 *The international media standard*

For my purposes here, this term covers not only journalism, broadcasting, and the cinema, etc., but also publishing of every kind. The media standard exploits print both massively, in the press and publishing, and in smaller ways in television and the cinema, as with credit lists and scripted voiceovers. It also exploits those forms of regional speech (primarily on radio

and television, and in the cinema) that are more or less internationally transparent, such as US Southern States usage, and Irish and Scottish usage. Some regional forms have long been considered standard by linguists and others (as for example *Received Pronunciation* or *RP* in England, whose centre of gravity is the upper and middle classes of south-east England), but views on good spoken usage are currently much less *dirigiste* than earlier in the century, and the concept 'standard' is less and less applied to *RP* in the UK or to its supposed equivalent in the US, *General American* (many US linguists insisting that there is no such thing). A major feature of any kind of speech on radio and television, and in the cinema, is spoken prose and its correlates (as discussed above).

3 *The international governmental, administrative, and legal standard*

This is the form which pervades large, usually centralized organizations of any kind, but especially governmental, administrative, and legal institutions. It is in the main territorial, being the range of formal usage associated with the management of those nation-states in which English is a *de facto* or *de jure* official language, but is also significantly international in for example the work of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union. It has its own traditions and quirks, as for example with the English of the UN, in which for historical reasons (beginning with the League of Nations) the orthographic style of the UK predominates. US documents within this framework retain their own conventions, but any UN printed commentary on them follows UK conventions.

4 *The international commercial and technological standard*

This is a less tightly ordered area, in which the administration for example of large multinational organizations (whether ENL-based or not) may follow mainly US or UK norms, or engage in a judicious mix of the two (depending on where they operate in the world). By and large, business executives, academics, and leading technologists comfortably engage in what might – with tongue only slightly in cheek – be called 'MBA English'. Two considerable exceptions to uniformity do, however, exist: first, the vast array of ESL/EFL businesspeople

who use 'fractured' or 'approximate' or 'off-shore' Englishes to negotiate and clinch their deals; second, the *laissez-faire* usage associated with computer technology and especially special-interest bulletin boards and other outlets on the Internet.

5 *The international educational standard*

This last exists predominantly for the young, but also contains its own professional and other registers. It draws on the others and in turn feeds them as fresh generations emerge from schools and colleges to engage with the wider world. Because the educational standard is expected in this way to carry the other standard strands to the highest possible level of literacy and fluency among the largest possible number of young people, it bears a heavy burden of social expectation. As a result, it evokes an emotional debate that is often heavily politicized. Educational course books and institutional and other style manuals provide the more or less authoritative forms, recommendations, and suggestions that help sustain the whole dynamic structure.

There is plenty of this five-strand Standard English around, but it is dwarfed by the innumerable non-standard varieties of the language, whether they are dialects (as in Yorkshire) or creoles (as in Guyana), or colloquial and slang usage generally, or nativized versions of what were formerly non-native varieties (as in Singapore). It is also at the same time and to an increasing extent continuous with all kinds of approximations to standard usage in ENL, ESL, and EFL communities alike, which is one source of the alarm felt by defenders of the standard faith. Arguing for the safeguarding of a core standard English around the world, Randolph Quirk observed in 1983:

The English language works pretty well in its global context today: certainly the globe has at present no plausible substitute. But let me underline my main point by giving four examples of English working best in the global context. They are the BBC World Service of London; All India Radio of Delhi; the *Straits Times* of Singapore; and the *Japan Times* of Tokyo. They represent oral and printed media, and they represent ENL, ESL, and EFL countries. And there are several outstanding features in common to these and to the scores of analogous examples that might have been selected. They all use a form of English that is

both understood and respected in every corner of the globe where any knowledge of any variety of English exists. They adhere to forms of English familiarly produced by only a minority of English speakers in any of the four countries concerned. And – mere accent alone apart – they observe as uniform a standard as that manifest in any language on earth.

Quirk highlights the success of English-language print and broadcast media worldwide. What he says is true and will continue indefinitely to be true, just as Latin continued indefinitely to be the most effective international vehicle for people like Bacon for many years after he wrote the *Novum Organon*. Despite all the argument and emotion surrounding the issue of maintaining standards in English, the international language, with its print base, is at the end of the 20th century a marked success, serving all humankind as the first high-level global lingua franca. If such an entity did not already exist, the global village would have to invent it. **EJ**

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