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## **Standard English, RP and the standard–non-standard relationship**

Paul Kerswill

Department of Linguistics and English Language  
Lancaster University

### **1. ‘Standard English’ and spoken English as opposing norms: a demonstration**

The populations of the British Isles have a varied, and often strained relationship with the language with which they have to engage every day in print and in the spoken media. This is the language through which they are (almost) all educated, and which, many of them are persuaded, is both correct and, in an absolute sense, good. Some are at ease with this language, others struggle to master it. A few turn their backs on it. This bald characterisation of the multiple relationships between language users and Standard English is intended to highlight, not only the diversity of the sociolinguistic set-ups throughout the islands, but also the wide range of beliefs, opinions and responses relating to the notion of ‘Standard English’ on the part of educators, policy makers and professional linguists, as well as, of course, those millions who do not belong to any of these groups. This chapter will address, first, how ‘Standard English’ and ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP) have been conceptualised by those who have an academic, professional or policy-maker’s interest in them. Second, the chapter will deal with the nature of the ‘variety space’ which is said to be bounded by Standard English and RP on one side and by ‘non-standard’, ‘vernacular’ speech on the other.

As we shall see later, the standard–non-standard dimension is closely related to the distinction between written and spoken language. But let us begin with an illustration of how norms involving standard/written English interact with norms of spoken or non-standard usage. Sixteen adult non-linguistically trained speakers of British English were asked to perform a task judging the ‘use in spoken English’ of the following sentences:

1. He and I are going shopping
2. I and he are going shopping
3. Him and me are going shopping
4. Me and him are going shopping

For their judgements, respondents could choose between: ‘Normal and natural’, ‘OK, but perhaps something a bit odd’, ‘OK, but rather odd’, ‘Very odd’, and ‘Virtually impossible’. The rationale for the task was as follows. English insists on nominative forms in subject positions (such as *I*, *he*), and accusative forms in object positions (*me*, *him*). However, it is apparent that, in conjoined subjects, the accusative form may appear, giving such utterances as “Me and him are going shopping”, among speakers who would not dream of using *me* or *him* as single subjects. This discrepancy between the single and conjoined subjects has been explained as the use of the *default accusative* in conjoined subjects, of the same type that gives the answer

“Me” to the question, “Who wants ice cream?”<sup>1</sup> There is, thus, a potential conflict between the default accusative subjects and the ‘correct’ “He and I are going shopping”.

The second area tested here is the ‘correct’ order of presentation of the other and the self: many children have been taught that it is polite to mention the other person before themselves, so that second and third person pronouns should appear before the first person pronoun. Thus, in the task, judgements about both orders were sought.

In order to allow respondents to choose their own criteria, the question itself was phrased in as bare a form as possible (‘Below are four sentences. Please judge their use in spoken English by placing an x in the appropriate column.’). The judgement categories do not refer to correctness, but to usage, in a way that allows respondents to invoke both prescriptive and frequency-of-use criteria. Finally, the implied context (mundane, involving oral production) was chosen to increase the acceptability of default accusatives even in sentences presented in printed form. The results were as follows:

	Normal and natural	OK, but perhaps something a bit odd	OK, but rather odd	Very odd	Virtually impossible
1. He and I are going shopping	8	3	1	3	1
2. I and he are going shopping		2	2	6	6
3. Him and me are going shopping		7	3	4	2
4. Me and him are going shopping	5	2	2	4	3

Both the nominative (1 or 2) and the accusative (3 or 4) forms are fairly widely accepted. An inspection of the individual responses shows that there is, however, an overwhelming tendency for respondents to go for *either* the nominative *or* the accusative, only three accepting both by entering a tick in either the first or the second response column.

An interpretation of this result would be to say, simply, that there are two grammars at play: some people have the default-accusative rule in conjoined subjects, while others don’t. However, this would imply a massive difference in the grammars of the two sets of speakers. Given that all but two of these speakers are university graduates (i.e., they have a similarly high involvement with written norms), this seems unlikely – though one would not wish to exclude the possibility. A better explanation is that different people are orienting, more or less consciously, to different norms: either those of ‘Standard English’, corresponding quite closely to the written language, or those of speech, incorporating both informal and dialectal features. Further support for this interpretation is the fact that, for those who chose the nominative, the prescribed order of third-person-first is strongly preferred (sentence

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<sup>1</sup> There are technical linguistic explanations for this pattern, and I am grateful to Mark Newson for pointing these out to me. In English, the grammar has difficulty in assigning the nominative case in conjoined subjects, preferring the default form, such as *me* or *him*. Other languages, such as Hungarian or German, do not follow this pattern; this is a parametric difference. The presence of “He and I”, etc., as conjoined subjects is the result of a prescriptive rule, and conflicts with the normal grammar. That this is an imposed rule is suggested by the occasional presence of nominative forms in prepositional phrases or in object positions, such as “between you and I” or “She came over to meet you and I”; these forms originate in hypercorrection. Similarly, the preferred ordering of third and second person subjects before the first person, as in “You and I”, is a prescriptive rule without a basis in the grammar of English.

1), while, for those who selected the accusative, first-person-first is favoured (sentence 4) – corresponding, in all likelihood, to spoken usage. The experiment did not explore whether people felt uncertain in their judgements. It is likely that they did, as witnessed by Trudgill's (1975: 42) assertion that some speakers feel uneasy about the utterance *It was him that did it* because it is not 'correct'.

This simple experiment demonstrates the existence, and strength, of the two opposing sets of norms, which we can probably label as 'mainly written/standard' and 'mainly spoken/non-standard'. If people seem able to choose which set to orient themselves to in this experiment, with its straightforward choices and barely contextualised language, then it is certain that they do so, too, in 'real' instances of language use, but in far more complex ways that involve much more than a single binary selection. So we have to recognise that, in the plethora of overlapping and nested speech communities of the British Isles, there will be a multiplicity of linguistic norms. One of these is Standard English, which as we shall see has a privileged position.

## **2. Understanding 'Standard English'**

### 2.1 Whose perspective?

So far, I have avoided trying to define 'Standard English'. This is because the way this notion (or lay externalisations of it such as 'correct' or 'good' English) is understood is closely related to the perspective of the particular language user or commentator. A member of the population 'at large' will have a view informed, at the very least, by his or her early socialisation, family history, educational experience, socio-economic class (however defined), social network, participation in the 'linguistic market' at work (Sankoff and Laberge 1978), ethnic (including national) origin, and personal, including political, beliefs. Academic commentators (such as the present writer) will claim to perform a rational analysis of the notion of 'Standard English', accountable to the axioms of their academic sub-discipline. For some, this will involve a dissociation from the long list of social factors just given, with the claim that popular beliefs do not have face validity and that a linguistic analysis is required. Others will integrate their analyses with due recognition of the social factors. For a third group of academics, lay beliefs about and behaviours towards Standard English will themselves be the object of research, as will the social, demographic and ideological factors impinging on the status and use of Standard English and other varieties. In the course of this chapter, all these perspectives will crop up in different guises. Finally, it must be realised that policy makers, who are often politicians and not necessarily 'experts', may or may not have the academic's reflective or critical skills – or may choose not to apply them (see Chapter 24). However, because of their huge influence, what they determine affects millions of people in their everyday lives.

### 2.2 Time, place and ideology

Ideas surrounding 'Standard English' depend on the social and economic relationships between sections of the population in a particular time and place – and on the ideologies that are linked to these social conditions. This is most clearly seen in the

rise of a belief in a ‘standard’ pronunciation in Britain. Early and mid-Victorian England saw unprecedented social change, with the emergence of an urban industrial working class. According to L. Milroy (1999: 184), rural dialects had become ‘revalorised’ as ‘class dialects’, as the population became urbanised under the capitalist system. A discourse of ‘class’ emerged, reflecting a view of social formation which was ‘not necessarily determined by birth’ (Mugglestone 1995: 74) and, at the same time, one of the main symbols of class became pronunciation. A typical commentator of the time stated that, ‘The language of the highest classes ... is now looked upon as the standard of English pronunciation’ (Graham 1869: 156, quoted in Mugglestone 1995: 70). The intrinsic ‘superiority’ of RP (as this variety became known) was argued for by Wyld, who called it ‘the most pleasing and sonorous form’ (1934, quoted in J. Milroy 2000: 19), and its basis in upper class usage is explicit in his writings.

Increased social mobility in the second half of the twentieth century has apparently led to the downgrading of the status of this ‘standard’ pronunciation, RP, in favour of mildly regionally accented varieties such as ‘Estuary English’ (Rosewarne 1984; Crystal 1995: 365; Kerswill 2001). The diminishing status of RP has brought to the surface yet again the class-based ‘standard ideology’, by which the inherent correctness, even morality, of Standard English and of RP continue to be asserted as being a matter of common sense (L. Milroy 1999: 174-5). Commenting on a study of the English of the New Town of Milton Keynes (Kerswill 1996; Kerswill and Williams 2000, 2005), John Osborne wrote:

It was announced last week that Essex girl has been supplanted by the children of Milton Keynes, who uniformly speak with a previously unidentified and hideously glottal accent ... Nothing is more depressing than [Milton Keynes], this gleaming gum-boil plonked in the middle of England. And now there is a home-grown accent to match. (*Daily Mail*, 7<sup>th</sup> August 1994)

– thus making an explicit link between a purportedly disreputable place and this new, degenerate, accent, which was held to be an example of Estuary English. (I return to the Estuary English debate in the last section.)

Few of today’s academic commentators espouse this view, and this signals a gulf between the academy on one hand and opinion formers and policy makers on the other (cf Chapter 23). However, J. Milroy (2000) argues that the prominence of Standard English in English historical linguistics is precisely a result of this ‘standard ideology’; arguably this ideology partly lies behind the willingness of today’s (socio)linguists to engage with Standard English and RP as entities that can be described, rather than as abstract notions that are constructed discursively. The remainder of the chapter, however, focuses on the description, rather than the construction, of these entities.

### **3. Standard English and Received Pronunciation: the descriptive approach**

#### **3.1 Accent and dialect**

It has long been customary in British dialectology to distinguish between *accent* and *dialect* differences between varieties of English (Abercrombie 1967: 19; Trudgill 1975: 20; Crystal 1995: 298). Minimal definitions are that an accent is ‘a particular

way of pronouncing a language' (Trask 1997: 3), or that 'the term *accent* ... refers solely to differences in pronunciation' (Trudgill 2000: 5). These are set against 'dialect', which, according to Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 9), refers to 'varieties distinguished from each other by differences of grammar and vocabulary' – such as the verb forms in *I wrote it* and *I writ it*, or the different patterns of negation found in *I don't want any* and *I don't want none*, or the use of the verb *grave* for 'dig' in parts of northern England (Trudgill 1999a: 128). There are also various sociolinguistic definitions of the terms in the British and Irish contexts. Britain (2005) points out that, while 'accent' has not proved particularly controversial, 'dialect' has been subject to a range of definitions. In the 'Anglo-Saxon' world, 'dialect' is used to cover any variety of language that can be delimited linguistically or (more rarely) socially; thus, Standard English is a dialect – a description of it that goes against most lay understandings. For lay speakers, and for many linguists, a dialect is a subset of a language, usually with a geographical restriction on its distribution. By most definitions, dialects are not standardised, and are hence more subject to variability (Britain 2005). Some commentators claim that non-standard dialects lack 'communicative functionality' (Ammon 1998: 197, cited in Britain 2003), while others oppose this idea, saying that, outside most institutional contexts, they are, in fact, more functional than standard varieties (Britain 2003). We will have more to say on the definition of Standard English later in this chapter.

Despite apparent agreement, the term 'accent' as used in British dialectology is problematic. For a descriptive linguist, the definitions given above for 'accent' hardly suffice, even if they are adequate pointers for most lay needs. Greater specificity leads to difficulties, as we shall see. Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 36) list three types of accent variation:

- Type 1. 'systemic or inventory variability, when different speakers have different sets (or systems) of phonemes', such as the absence of /ʌ/ in northern England, so that words like STRUT<sup>2</sup> have /ʊ/
- Type 2. 'realizational variability [referring] to the ways in which a single phoneme may have different phonetic realizations'; an example would be London [æ] corresponding to Northern [a] in words like TRAP
- Type 3. "lexical" variability, referring to the use of different series of phonemes for the same word', such as the older south-east English use of /ɔ:/ in words like *off* and *cross* (rhyming with *morph*), rather than /ɒ/ (the first vowel in *toffee*)

Both Francis (1983: 28) and Wakelin (1972: 84) take fundamentally the same approach.

However, Wells (1982a: 2-5) argues for the particular importance of Hughes and Trudgill's third type of accent variation when investigating regional dialect differences – and it is here a difficulty emerges. He notes that many of the differences between a 'traditional-dialect' (as spoken by linguistically conservative, typically rural people) and an accent of what he calls 'General English' (more mainstream varieties) are 'phonological', that is, composed of accent differences that are a matter of 'the lexical incidence of particular phonemes in particular words' (1982a: 5) –

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<sup>2</sup> Wells's (1982a) mnemonic keywords are shown in small capitals.

corresponding to Hughes and Trudgill's Type 3. Differences of this kind include the form [brɪg] ('brig') for 'bridge' and [rɪəd] for 'road', both from the far north of England, and [wɒm] for 'home' in the English Midlands. All of these differ in terms of the phonemes present in the 'same' words in other traditional-dialects and in General English. Wells cites extensive accent differences of this kind, particularly in Scotland. In a study of Durham dialect (Kerswill 1987), I informally noted some 120 features of this kind from general conversation, including [θaut] for 'thought', and [pʌnd] for 'pound'.

This pervasive phonological variation between dialects is 'paradoxical', according to Wells. This calls into question the idea that differences in lexical incidence are 'mere' accent differences. There is, in fact, strong evidence that speakers themselves behave as if this kind of difference is of the same order as more 'deep' (i.e. grammatical) dialect differences as well as lexical (vocabulary) differences. It is apparent that, in rural northern England and rural Scotland, a certain amount of 'dialect switching' occurs (Cheshire and Trudgill 1989: 99): speakers switch between two 'codes', one (perhaps) for school, another for use elsewhere. The 'school' variety avoids most of the local phonological forms of words, in addition to not containing dialect vocabulary. A discussion with some older Durham speakers on the subject of dialect made it clear that, when chatting to me (a southern 'Standard English' speaker), they were conscious of avoiding dialect words, such as *beck* for 'stream', as well as dialect phonological forms such as [tak] for 'take' or [gən jəm] for 'go home'— which, with me, they would pronounce [go: hɔ:m], using a locally accented version of 'General English'. Thus, for these speakers, dialect vocabulary and Type 3 accent features went hand-in-hand, and together constituted their overt construction of 'dialect'. That this is so is supported by their scorn for new features entering the dialect, especially /f/ and /v/ for /θ/ and /ð/ in words such as *thing* and *brother*, as well as youth slang, on the grounds that they were neither 'dialect' nor 'good English'.

### 3.2 Traditional and mainstream dialects

A solution to the problem of distinguishing between 'accent' and 'dialect' differences lies in the particular characteristics of 'traditional-dialect' and 'General English'. At this point, we will adopt the more commonly used terms for the same concepts, as elaborated by Trudgill (1999a: 5). 'Traditional dialect' (without the hyphen) refers to the speech of some people in rural and peripheral areas. Traditional dialects differ greatly from Standard English and from each other (ibid.), and would include such hypothetical utterances as

[a tɛlt ðɪ ʔə se: ðu: hazn ʔə gən jəm ðə nɪt]  
*ah telt thee to seh thoo hazn't to gən yem theneet*

which in Durham corresponds to 'I told you to say you musn't go home tonight'.

The second term is 'mainstream dialect', which refers to the 'Standard English Dialect' and 'Modern Nonstandard Dialects' (Trudgill 1999a: 5), characteristic of urban (especially southern) England, most of Wales, younger people in general and

the middle class. The terms seems to correspond closely to Wells's 'General English'. In Reading in the south of England, utterances such as

[ʃɪ kʌm ʌʔp vɛdɪm jɛstədəɪ]  
*She come up Reading yesterday*

together with its Standard English equivalent, spoken with a Reading or other accent,

*She came to Reading yesterday*

are both 'mainstream dialect', as is the 'Standard English' version of the Durham utterance above, spoken with a Durham accent:

[a to:ldʒə tə se: jə mʌsntʔ go: ho:m tənɑ:t].

The crux of the matter is that these and all other mainstream dialect utterances are phonologically closely related to one another and to utterances in spoken versions of Standard English. This means that the differences between them are mainly of Type 2 in Hughes and Trudgill's taxonomy, with a few Type 1 and Type 3 differences represented. Thus, mainstream dialects in England, Wales and much of Ireland share largely the same phonological system, with similar distributions of phonemes across the vocabulary. In Scotland and those areas of the north of Ireland where the dialects are Scots-derived, the situation is a little different, since most speakers use a radically different vowel system, governed by the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (Wells 1982b: 400; Scobbie, Hewlett and Turk 1999; see Chapter 5). Despite this, it is possible to draw correspondences across all mainstream, but not traditional, dialects in terms of the phonemes used in particular words, as the following table shows:

	Traditional		Mainstream			
	Scots	Durham	Scots	Durham	London	Received Pronunciation
'daughter'	[dɔxtər]	[daʊtʔə]	[dɔʔər]	[dɔ:tʔə]	[dɔʊʔə]	[dɔ:tə]
'night'	[nɛxt]	[ni:t]	[nɛɪʔ]	[naɪt]	[naɪʔ]	[naɪt]

Surprisingly, only two of ten features discussed by Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 54-64) are of Type 2 ('Long Mid Diphthonging' in the vowels of FACE and GOAT and the realisation of /t/ as [ʔ] after vowels). Three others concern phonological differences of Type 1 (the absence of /ʌ/ in the north of England, the variable dropping of /h/, and the difference between English and Scottish vowel systems). However, the remainder do not fit into any of the three categories, and include the distribution of /æ/ and /ɑ:/ in words like *path* and *dance* (phonologically patterned distribution with exceptions), the presence/absence of /r/ before consonants in words like *card*, the use of /ɪ/ or /i:/ word-finally in words like *city* and *money*, and the use of /ɪŋ/ or /ɪn/ in the suffix *-ing*. The important generalisation about all ten features is that

they have a high degree of phonological predictability. This means that, with knowledge of a pronunciation in Dialect A, it is usually possible to determine what it will be in Dialect B, *either* because there is a one-to-one correspondence *or* because a general rule can be applied. For example, if we know that a southern accent has /ɑ:/ in a word containing a following voiceless fricative, as in *bath*, then we can be almost certain that a northern accent will have /æ/ in the same item. Interestingly, the reverse prediction does not hold so well, since we find items like *gas* and *mass* with /æ/ in the south.

On the basis of these observations, we can refine the notion of ‘accent difference’ to refer to any pronunciation difference where there is a *high degree of predictability in at least one direction*. This has the effect of excluding the large number of Type 3 phonological differences found between traditional dialects and between these and spoken Standard English. Type 3 differences, then, fit in easily with the ‘dialect’ differences that otherwise pervade traditional dialects – and this is consistent with the way speakers treat them sociolinguistically, as we have seen. It has the advantage, too, of taking into account speakers’ own intuitions. As for mainstream dialects, we can say that the differences between are almost exclusively predictable in the senses just outlined.

### 3.3 Standard English as a discrete set of rules and lexis

A number of linguists have argued strongly that Standard English is easily defined and delimited: it shares its grammar with the vast majority of Standard English varieties world-wide, differing from them in a small number of minor grammatical features. Its vocabulary is less fixed, though it avoids regional, traditional words. While it is the only form of English used in writing, it is also used in speech, and has native speakers throughout the world. Trudgill (1999b) gives perhaps the clearest statement of this position. He argues that Standard English is not a style, a register or an accent, noting that its speakers have access to a full range of informal styles, and can produce it with different accents, while non-standard speakers can discuss technical subjects without switching to Standard English. Standard English is a dialect, defined by the criteria I have discussed. However, because it is standardised and codified, it is not part of a continuum of dialects: either a feature is standard, or it is not (Trudgill 1999b: 124). It also does not have a particular pronunciation associated with it. Trudgill lists eight ‘idiosyncrasies’ of Standard English grammar, four of which (perhaps the most widespread in mainstream dialects) are the following:

1. Standard English does not distinguish between the forms of the auxiliary *do* and its main verb forms. Non-standard varieties normally include the forms *I done it* (main verb), *but did he?* (auxiliary): Standard English has *did* for both functions.
2. Standard English does not permit double negation (negative concord), as in *I don’t want none*.
3. Standard English has an irregular formation of the reflexive, with *myself* based on the possessive *my*, and *himself* based on the object form *him*. Non-standard dialects generalise the possessive form, as in *hisself*.



4. Standard English redundantly distinguishes between the preterite and past participle forms of many verbs, as in *I saw – I have seen*, or *I did – I have done*, where dialects have forms like *seen* or *done* for both.  
(adapted from Trudgill 1999b: 125)

Another linguist working along similar lines is Hudson (2000), who lists further Standard English features, including:

5. Standard English adverbs ending in *-ly*, as in *Come quickly!* Most non-standard varieties use the bare form, as in *Come quick!*
6. Standard English relative pronouns *that* or *which*. Non-standard varieties tend to have *what*.

Despite the strength of the Standard norm, there are some areas of variability, such as differing preferences for (spoken) forms such as: *I haven't finished* vs. *I've not finished*. (See Hughes and Trudgill 1996: 15-21 for a discussion of grammatical variation within Standard English.)

Both Trudgill and Hudson give sociolinguistic characterisations of Standard English. For Trudgill it is a 'purely social dialect' (1999b: 124). He estimates that it is spoken natively by 12–15 per cent of the population, concentrated at the top of the social class scale. It was selected because it was the variety of the most influential social groups. Subsequently, according to Trudgill, its 'social character' was reinforced through its use in an 'education to which pupils ... have had differential access depending on their social-class background' (1999b: 124). Hudson takes a slightly different approach, focusing more on the written form and literacy. He states (2000) that Standard English is '(1) written in published work, (2) spoken in situations where published writing is influential, especially in education ..., [and] (3) spoken natively by people who are most influenced by published writing ...'. These ideas mesh with the notion of the 'linguistic market' referred to above (Sankoff and Laberge 1978).

### 3.4 Pushing at the boundaries: the grammar of spoken Standard English

It is clear that a spoken Standard English norm firmly based on written norms was not fully established until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Thomas Hughes, while using Standard English for his narrative in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), gives the privileged (but not upper-class) Rugby School pupils dialogue including: 'It ain't such good fun now', 'It don't hurt unless you fall on the floor', and (with a zero subject relative) 'There's no other boy in the house would have done it for me'. By the end of the century, popular publications on polite behaviour and etiquette began to appear, dispensing advice about 'good' spoken usage to a receptive aspiring middle class audience. Most dealt with both pronunciation and lexical and grammatical choices. On the latter, we find statements such as: 'Don't speak ungrammatically. Study books of grammar, and the writings of the best authors' ('Censor' n.d. (c. 1880): 61). Later, we find: 'Whether or not we are aware of doing so, we do note how people use words; and we may find that educated people agree in the manner. They say "you were" and not "you was". They say "He and I are a pair" and not "Him and me is a pair." Now, a rule of grammar is simply a statement of the agreement among educated people ...'

(Weston n.d. (c. 1945): 15). Clearly, ‘Censor’ considers good writing to be the best model for speech, a view which we explore further below. Weston, too, is specific about models for good speech – educated people’s usage – though he does not refer the reader to grammar books. Yet even educated upper-class speakers in the mid-twentieth century could use non-standard forms, in a country still with rigid class boundaries. An example is the former Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan’s use of *it don’t* (Wardhaugh 1999: 149), continuing the non-standard, but privileged norm we saw in *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*.

More recent definitions of Standard English intended for a popular market maintain the idea that it can be defined with reference to speech; thus: ‘Standard English is that form of the English language which is spoken by the generality of cultured people in Great Britain’ (Phythian 1993: 180, quoting the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*). For Phythian, a distinction should be made between ‘Standard English’ and ‘colloquialism’, which he defines as ‘informal Standard English, [consisting] of a vocabulary and, occasionally, a syntax ... which are appropriate to familiar conversation ... Colloquialisms, in time, may be promoted to the status of Standard English ...’ (Phythian 1993: 180). Phythian clearly singles out features of spoken grammar (though he does not give any examples) as being distinct from Standard English, though still acceptable since they are future candidates for inclusion. Ayto (1995), however, accepts that there is both written and spoken Standard English, and cites the use of *bust* for ‘broken’ as appropriate in speech but probably not in writing (p. 279). He also accepts *I didn’t use to like eggs* as the spoken alternative to *I used not to like eggs*, which he recommends for written usage (pp. 279-80). Ayto’s features of ‘spoken Standard English’ closely correspond to Phythian’s ‘colloquialisms’.

Ayto’s view is very close to that of Trudgill (1999b: 120), who accepts as Standard English informal usages such as *The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip*. However, Trudgill expands the definition by accommodating constructions which are typical of oral production, as in *There was this man, and he’d got this gun ...* (p. 121). He argues that the use of *this* as an indefinite is to be seen as a feature of colloquial style, not related to the standard- non-standard dimension. A counterargument to Trudgill is that indefinite *this* is probably not widely used by Standard English speakers, though here we see a conflict between spoken norms and a ‘standard language ideology’ based on writing – to which we turn now.

Cheshire explores the specific and complex relationship between the grammars of written and spoken Standard English in detail (1999; Cheshire and Stein 1997). In her 1999 article, she appears to make two overarching claims in relation to spoken Standard English. The first is that much descriptive and theoretical work on Standard English is based on intuitions that are more firmly grounded in written norms than in speech. This is so for three reasons. First, academic linguists have intense contact with Standard English, particularly in its written form (p. 131). Second, until recently corpora of authentic speech have been derived from conversations among academics (p. 130). And third, it appears that very many speakers’ access to intuitions about typically spoken or non-standard constructions is very shaky. Cheshire states that, even among educated people, forms such as *There’s lots of museums* are much more frequent than the ‘correct’ *There are lots of museums*, which shows concord between verb and postverbal subject. Despite the preponderance of the former construction, people’s intuitions usually lead them to accept only the latter (Cheshire 1999: 131, quoting Meechan and Foley 1994). This is closely tied to the notion of Standard English as an ideology, an idea I explore below.

Cheshire's second claim is concerned with the actual properties of spoken Standard English. She concludes that we have to look outside generative grammar to find explanations for some of the phenomena observed. Following Sundby, Bjørge and Haugland (1991) and Meechan and Foley, Cheshire discusses concord (subject-verb agreement) as an area where codification has influenced judgements and usage. She argues that the preference in speech for the singular in the 'existential *there*' construction, as in *There's lots of museums*, may be related to the function of *there's*. Spoken language shows a preference for the presentation of new information at the end of a clause, with light elements at the beginning. These are supplied by *there's*, which contains both a light subject and an empty verb. It is also likely that the form *there's* is stored, economically, as a prefabricated phrase. It is functionally identical to the invariant *il y a* in French and *es gibt* in German, both used to present new information in discourse (Cheshire 1999: 138). Meechan and Foley find that a generative explanation for the prescribed plural is complex; Cheshire claims that, since the singular is preferred in discourse, there is simply no plural to be explained (p. 136).

This kind of argumentation allows us to see more clearly the nature of the conflicting judgements revealed in the 'default accusative' experiment. As with existential *there*, there was a choice between two alternatives, one prescriptively 'correct' according to the codified norms of Standard English, the other in line with spoken usage. There is a difference, however. In the case of the default accusative, there are strong internal arguments for the grammaticality of *Me and him went shopping*, in a way that is unrelated to discourse function. Cheshire's argument seems to be that the grammaticality (or, rather, acceptability established through use) of *There's lots of museums* is directly related to its discourse function, and need not (or, perhaps, cannot) be 'explained' through generative grammar.

We turn briefly to the way policy makers have dealt with issues of spoken grammar. As we have seen, grammar, prescription and discourse function clearly all interact in an unsuspectedly complex way. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising (though still unfortunate) that the compilers of the *National Literacy Strategy* for England and Wales (Department for Education and Employment 1998) fail to grasp basic functional distinctions between speech and writing when they state:

Writers and speakers may use ellipsis for purposes of economy or style. For instance in the exchange: "Where are you going?" "To town", the second speaker has missed out "I am going". She/he assumes that the reader will understand the omission; this saves boring repetition. (DfEE 1998: 79)

Sealey (1999) points out the confusion in the passage between speakers and writers – this is clearly a dialogue. More importantly, 'the notion of an "omission" here is quite misplaced: when speakers share a context for their talk, they do not set about modifying a written script, judiciously missing out details so as to "save boring details"' (Sealey 1999: 6). This is very much akin to Cheshire's argument that we must not interpret, still less judge, spoken grammar by the criteria of the grammar of written language.

### 3.5 RP as a 'variety'

We turn now to ‘Received Pronunciation’, or ‘RP’<sup>3</sup> – an abbreviation which has been claimed to be part of the institutionalisation of this variety (Macaulay 1997: 42). The idea that there is, or should be, a standard or correct spoken form of English goes back at least to Puttenham (1936 [1589]), Thomas Sheridan being an important eighteenth-century proponent (1999 [1762]). In purely descriptive (rather than socio-political or ideological) terms, the salient fact about RP is its non-regional nature. Even though RP is phonologically a south-eastern accent, in that it possesses /ʌ/ in STRUT, uses /ɑ:/ in BATH and is non-rhotic (i.e. it lacks non-prevocalic /r/ in words such as *bird*), it is in principle impossible to tell the provenance of an RP speaker. There is uncertainty about when such a non-regional accent first emerged. Despite the interest aroused by Sheridan and other writers, there is no evidence that any kind of non-regional pronunciation was in widespread use until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Honey (1989, cited in L. Milroy 1999: 185) argues that it was not until after 1870 that British people with a privileged education began to have a standard accent, a position implicitly endorsed by Macaulay (1997), who quotes Ellis as writing: ‘At present there is *no* standard of pronunciation. There are many ways of pronouncing English *correctly* ...’ (1869: 630, cited in Macaulay 1997: 36). Although Crystal dates the emergence of RP to slightly earlier in the nineteenth century (1995: 365), it is clear that, by the end of the century, RP had become a dominant feature of the fee-paying public schools, students and academics at Oxford and Cambridge universities, the colonial service, teachers, the Anglican Church and the officer class of the Army (L. Milroy 1999: 186).

The privileged social position of the users of RP meant, and still means, that discussion of it can be sensitive, and that nuances make a difference: Trudgill claims that, since RP is an implicitly codified variety, ‘it only takes one non-RP feature for a speaker not to be a speaker of RP’ (2002: 174). Trudgill’s view, however, causes difficulties, since RP, unlike Standard English, appears to be changing quite rapidly. This leads to problems of finding criteria for determining what are changes and/or permissible variations within RP, and what are features which make a person’s speech non-RP. Trudgill’s own criterion is simply to say that, for inclusion as part of RP, a feature must not be a regional feature (2002: 175). The difficulty, I think, with this is that almost all of the ‘new’ RP features, such as the glottalling of /t/ before another consonant (as in *let me*) or the fronting of /u:/ (as in GOOSE) to [ʊ:], are already widespread across regional accents. RP is following wider trends, perhaps a step or two behind. This convergence, or in some cases shared change (as with the fronting of /u:/ – see Kerswill and Williams 2005) involving RP and other varieties means that there is an attrition of *distinctively* RP features. Other features must remain to distinguish RP, even though they will be fewer in number. For the time being, however, there is no danger of *all* the distinguishing features of RP disappearing (Trudgill 2002: 177).

The approach to RP taken by a number of linguists is to name different varieties defined according to various non-linguistic criteria, and then to list the phonetic characteristics of each. The classifications vary, and do not completely match. Gimson (1970: 88) distinguishes between: ‘the *conservative* RP forms used by the older generation and, traditionally, by certain professors or social groups; the *general* RP forms most commonly in use and typified by the pronunciation adopted by the BBC; and the *advanced* RP forms mainly used by young people of exclusive social groups ...’ (emphases in original). Wells (1982b: 279) refers to a ‘central

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<sup>3</sup> See Crystal (1995: 365) and McArthur (1992) for information on the origin of the term.

tendency’, which he calls *mainstream RP*, corresponding to Gimson’s general RP. This contrasts with *U-RP* (upper class RP) and with *adoptive RP* (spoken by those who did not speak RP as children). Wells (1997) suggests a more explicit set of social criteria, involving a strictly sociolinguistic approach: we identify people who we might expect to speak RP, and observe their speech. He does not develop the idea. Finally, Cruttenden (2001), in his revision of Gimson’s work, lists *general RP*, *refined RP* (upper class and associated with certain professions which traditionally recruit from the upper class), and *regional RP* (RP with a small number of regional features, such as vocalised /l/ in *milk*, or /æ/ for /ɑ:/ in *path*). Wells (1982b: 280) identifies problems with Gimson’s implicit age dimension – and these are removed by Cruttenden. However, Cruttenden now allows for some regional differentiation, something which Trudgill (2002: 177) excludes as a possibility for RP.

Between them, these three authors establish four intersecting criteria for differentiation within RP: age, social class, acquisition and regionality. Rather than trying to disentangle the minimum of sixteen potential sub-types this gives rise to, I shall briefly summarise some changes in RP, as given in the works cited in the previous paragraph (see Table 1). I base myself particularly on Wells (1982b: 279-301), who is so far the only author to attempt a detailed description of the sub-types of RP.

Table 1 Eight changes in RP

	Change	Comment
1	Fronting of the vowel of GOAT from [oʊ] to [əʊ] or [əʊ̆]	‘Advanced’ RP in 1970; now almost complete; supersedes earlier hyper-fronting to [ɛʊ]
2	Final /ɪ/ replaced by /i:/ in <i>happy</i>	Well established
3	r-intrusion, giving <i>idea</i> [r] <i>of</i>	A long-completed change, but avoided by some in adoptive RP
4	Lowering of /æ/ in TRAP from [æ] to [a]	Nearing completion
5	Use of /ɔ:/ for /ʊə/ in <i>sure</i> , <i>poor</i> , etc.	Well established
6	t-glottalling (use of [ʔ] for word-final /t/)	Well established before a consonant, as in <i>let me</i> ; incipient before a vowel across a boundary as in <i>quite easy</i>
7	Split of allophones of /əʊ/ before syllable-final /l/ and elsewhere	Well established; a consequence of (1). Leads to [əʊ] in GOAT, [ɒʊ] in GOAL
8	Fronting of /u:/ as in GOOSE to [ʉ:] or [Y:]	Well established

I have already mentioned (and largely rejected) the convergence between RP and other varieties as a possible source of the disappearance of RP. A further, more substantial argument in support of the ‘disappearance’ hypothesis is the rise of what has become known as ‘Estuary English’, as a popular variety of spoken Standard English with phonetic features placing it between RP and broad London Cockney. Before we can judge the matter, we must look at the evidence for Estuary English, and set it in the context of dialect levelling.

#### 4. Dialect levelling, social mobility and ‘Estuary English’

Since the mid-90s, a number of studies have reported *dialect levelling* – by which differences between local accents/dialects are reduced, features which make them distinctive disappear, and new features develop and are adopted by speakers over a wide area (see Chapter 3; chapters in Foulkes and Docherty 1999; Stuart-Smith and Tweedie 2000; Watt 2002; Kerswill 2003). Levelling is thought to centre on large urban areas, such as Tyneside or London, from which new features diffuse, and within whose reach high degrees of contact and mobility may lead to linguistic homogenisation. Estuary English is the only regional levelling process to receive a name and to become the subject of public debate. First described by Rosewarne (1984), it was characterised by him as follows:

Estuary English is a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and popular London speech at either end, Estuary English speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground. They are ‘between Cockney and the Queen’, in the words of *The Sunday Times*. (Rosewarne 1994: 3)

For Rosewarne, with its combination of parts of Cockney pronunciation with Standard English grammar, it is the speech of the upwardly mobile, as well as being a target for some RP speakers who feel that RP may arouse hostility (1984). Wells (1994a, b) has even suggested a standardised transcription for Estuary English – perhaps reinforcing the ‘standard ideology’ concept. Trudgill (2002) contests Rosewarne’s claims that Estuary English is new and that it is replacing RP. Instead, it is, simply, a south-eastern lower middle-class accent which has become more prominent as RP is being adopted by fewer people (a development already noted by Barber 1964: 26), while its phonetic features (e.g. l-vocalisation, as in ‘miwk’ for ‘milk’) are spreading individually from London. Meanwhile, RP is still spoken natively by many pupils at public schools, albeit with features (notably glottal stop for /t/ before consonants) which are spreading throughout Britain and are therefore non-regional.

What is not in dispute is that Estuary English spans a very wide range of accents, from near-Cockney (the variety vilified in the press as a sloppy replacement of ‘real’ dialect and ‘good’ English in general – cf. L. Milroy 1999: 181-2) to near-RP. This being so, it is difficult to call it a ‘variety’, and this is emphatically confirmed by the findings of Haenni (1999), Przedlacka (2002) and Altendorf (2003).

A far more realistic approach to Estuary English is to see it, instead, as referring to a set of levelled (relatively homogenised) regional – as opposed to local – accents or dialects spoken in the south-east of England. These varieties, and their counterparts throughout the British Isles, are a result of greatly heightened mobility since the period just after the Second World War, coupled with a change in ideology allowing non-RP users to occupy a range of occupations, especially in broadcasting, from which they were formerly effectively barred. Britain (2002) sees the loss of local dialects in the east of England as resulting from greater short- and long-term mobility, the replacement of primary and secondary by tertiary industries, labour market flexibility and family ties over greater geographical distances. The resulting contacts between people speaking different varieties of English lead to the attrition of strongly

local forms. The working-class dialect of the New Town of Milton Keynes represents, perhaps, an extreme version of this type of levelled variety, having no single distinguishing feature (Kerswill and Williams 2000); in this context, it is easy to see the reason for its castigation at the hands of the press.

Mobility does not guarantee ideological change. In Kerswill (2001), I suggested that the social changes that have allowed non-RP accents to be used in new contexts should be seen in the context of the ideology, first emerging in the 1960s, of gender and racial equality and the legalisation of contraception, abortion and homosexuality – coupled with a generally greater access to education. Set against this ‘liberal’ change is the rapid development, since the 1980s, of a meritocratic ideology, by which a traditional education and ‘breeding’ are of lesser consequence than the ability of the individual to make economic progress. These opposing ideological trends – the democratic/liberal and the meritocratic – have similar consequences for dialect change: in both cases, the old upper class based ‘standard ideology’ is challenged. The demographic changes over the same period have led to the development of new, levelled regional accents which, to a great extent, coincide linguistically with lower middle class accents. It is precisely this type of accent that is in the ascendancy *both* geographically (across Britain) *and* in the occupations once reserved for RP speakers. It is in the reaction of parts of the press that we see the ideological conflict being played out.

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