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‘Nonstandard’ English and Education

Julia Snell

5.2.1 Introduction

The issue of the use in schools of ‘standard’ versus ‘nonstandard’ English has been debated for decades by British academics, policy makers, teachers and parents. The debate has gained renewed prominence within the contemporary landscape of post-2010 education reforms, which include the introduction of a revised national curriculum for schools in England (DfE 2014) (see Cushing 2023 for a review). As part of this landscape, some schools have attracted national media attention with their ‘zero tolerance’ approaches to pupils’ spoken language. These include attempts to eradicate the use of regional dialect forms (such as ‘yous’ and ‘ain’t’) and/or the fillers and discourse markers characteristic of spontaneous speech (such as ‘like’). Behind these initiatives is the assumption that the use of nonstandardised English in speech will impede progress towards fully-fledged literacy, and thus children’s *spoken* language becomes the object of educational scrutiny. I interrogate this assumption in the chapter and consider the consequences for pupils who speak nonstandardised dialects.

I begin by reviewing the long-standing debate on how ‘standard English’ should be taught, considering the policies that have been proposed and implemented since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988. I then interrogate the key terms in this debate -- ‘standard’ versus ‘nonstandard’ -- highlighting differences in approach not just between policy makers and academics but also *within* the academic community. Here, I introduce a language ideological framework that treats categories like ‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard’ English as social constructions rather than linguistic fact. Next, I review the research evidence regarding children’s use of nonstandardised English at school, before ending with some reflections on the role sociolinguists have played in debates about language in education, with suggestions for future work. Throughout, I argue for the importance of a language ideological approach that aims to expose and challenge the hierarchies and inequalities that standard language ideology – i.e., the belief that there is only one ‘correct’ way to speak – reproduces.

5.2.2 Standard and Nonstandard English in Educational Policy

In the 1988 Education Act, the British government introduced a National Curriculum for England. Two committees were responsible for making recommendations for the new

curriculum in English: the Kingman Committee and the Cox Committee (DES 1988; DES 1989). Both emphasised the need for greater 'knowledge about language' among teachers as well as students (as Bullock [DES 1975] had done before them). This included knowledge of historical and geographical variation in English, with students expected to be able to discuss 'the systematic ways in which the grammar of some dialects differs from the grammar of SE [standard English]' (DES 1988:30). Traditional grammar teaching was eschewed in favour of a descriptive approach designed to facilitate students' understanding of 'standard English' while respecting the nonstandardised dialects many of them spoke. The emphasis was on raising pupils' awareness of grammatical differences and extending their language repertoires (rather than replacing nonstandardised usages with 'standard English').

Neither the Kingman nor Cox reports were received with full approval by the Conservative government of the day, having failed to recommend the return to a prescriptive approach to grammar teaching that had been expected. The reports angered pro-grammar conservatives and were pilloried by the right-wing press for the perceived lax approach to grammar and standards of 'correctness' (see Cameron 2012, Ch.3, and Crowley 2003, Ch.8 for a review). Nonetheless, English in the National Curriculum was published in 1990, based on the attainment targets and programmes of study recommended in Cox (DES 1989). The government initiated the *Language in the National Curriculum* (LINC) project to develop materials that would advance teachers' knowledge about language and help them to deliver the new curriculum. The materials built on the model of language recommended in Kingman and Cox, though Professor Ronald Carter, Director of the LINC project, noted that 'greater emphasis than in Kingman [was] given to the variation of language in different social and cultural contexts' (Carter 1990:6). Regrettably (though perhaps not surprisingly), this sociolinguistic focus was rejected by the government. The project was scrapped in 1991 and publication of the materials was blocked by the Minister of State for Education. Then, in 1992, the Secretary of State for Education announced a further review of English teaching to be conducted by the National Curriculum Council under the chairmanship of David Pascall, a chemical engineer whose perspective on grammar and standard English ran contrary to the expert linguistic advice that had underpinned Kingman, Cox and LINC:

> It's grammatically correct English ... so that you can be understood clearly, so that you don't speak sloppily, you use tenses and prepositions properly, you don't say 'He done it' and you don't split infinitives. . . . 'He done it' is speaking English incorrectly. That's bad grammar. We think it important that our children speak correctly.

(Pascall, quoted in the *Independent on Sunday*, 13 September 1992, cited in Cameron 2012:102)

The new proposals replaced 'knowledge about language' with greater emphasis on grammar and the speaking of 'standard English' from the earliest years (DfE 1993), satisfying traditionalists within the Conservative government and right-wing media whose mission it had become to uphold standards of 'correctness'. While the Pascall curriculum was never published, new statutory orders for English, which maintained the same focus on standardised English, were eventually issued in 1995 (with revisions in 1999, 2007 and 2014). Most recently, *The National Curriculum for England: Framework Document* (DfE 2014) states clearly: 'Pupils should be taught to speak clearly and convey ideas confidently using Standard English' (2014, 6.2:11). Significantly, by secondary school (Key Stage 3), pupils should be 'using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion (2014:86). Throughout, 'standard English' is assumed to apply to both speech and writing. There is little recognition of variation in dialect or in the way that spoken communication varies according to context; and there is thus little space for teachers and pupils to explore social variation, language attitudes, or the relationship between language and power.

The debates surrounding the introduction of the National Curriculum for English, and the rewrites that followed, are documented in more detail elsewhere[1]. My aim in giving this brief introduction is to underline the point that the teaching of 'standard English' (and thus the treatment of 'nonstandard English' in education) has long been a matter of intense political concern[2]. Cameron (2012:93-4) characterised the debate on grammar in the 1980/90s as 'a case of moral panic' in which it became commonplace for 'ignorance or defiance of grammatical rules [to be] equated with anti-social or criminal behaviour'. This seemingly irrational link makes sense only when we understand that traditional grammar had come to symbolise traditional values, such as respect for rules, hierarchies and authority. The panic about grammar was thus 'the metaphorical expression of persistent conservative fears that we are losing the values that underpin civilisation and sliding into chaos' (p. 95). Exploring post-2010 education policy, Cushing (2020a) likewise makes the link between

[1] See the earlier version of this chapter (Williams 2007) and also Cameron 2012; Carter 1996; Clark 1994, 2010; Crowley 2003; Marshall 2011.

[2] Brumfit described the suppression of LINC materials as 'an act of direct political censorship' (Brumfit 1992:269).

conservatism in language policy and increased emphasis on discipline, control and standards of behaviour in schools. He describes the methods used by some teachers to 'police' nonstandardised grammar in their classrooms and suggests that this is encouraged and legitimised by current English curriculum policy, as well as media reporting that (re)produces misconceptions about language. In a comment piece, Richard Hudson (2020) contests Cushing's claim that government policy on language is prescriptive. He argues that revisions to the National Curriculum 'consistently contrast Standard English with non-Standard English— not with "incorrect" or "bad" English' (p. 454) and suggests that 'when a school or teacher decides to "police" non-standard speech, this is *in spite of* the official government policy' (p. 452, my emphasis). Cushing (2020b), in turn, critiques Hudson's 'de-politicised stance' and makes the point that policy on language in education goes beyond the guidelines offered in the National Curriculum, including, for example, statutory grammar tests (DfE 2019), writing assessment frameworks (STA 2018) and Teachers Standards (DfE 2013). He suggests that these de-facto policy mechanisms serve 'to propagate and normalise prescriptivism' (2020b:467). For example, to gain qualified status, the Teachers Standards dictate that trainee teachers be judged on their ability to:

> demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject.
>
> (Teachers Standards, DfE 2013:11, cited in Cushing 2020b:466)

This benchmark clearly links 'standard English' with 'correctness' (and thus presupposes that other ways of speaking are 'incorrect'). The link between standard English and correctness is regularly taken for granted in discussions about language in education (see for example, the quotation from Pascall above), which is one of the reasons why Cushing (2020b:465) argues that 'language prescription, stigma and prejudice cannot be disentangled from *any* use of the phrase "Standard English"' (my emphasis). Take, for example, the use of 'standard English' by Ofsted, the School's inspectorate, when giving evidence to the Oracy All-Party-Parliamentary-Group's *Speak for Change* inquiry[3] on 14th July 2020:

[3] The final report of the Oracy APPG's *Speak for Change* Inquiry can be downloaded from their website: https://oracy.inparliament.uk/speak-for-change-inquiry

> What we [The Office for Standards in Education] mean [by standard English] is English that is correct, that enables you to become an active citizen, to gain entrance to the career professions and also what Geoff Barton calls 'the language habits of those who wield power' (Sarah Hubbard, Ofsted's National Lead for English at the time of the inquiry).

As well as equating 'standard English' with 'correctness', this definition establishes a link with 'those who wield power'. I take up this point in the next section, considering why attempts to define 'standard' and 'nonstandard' English in spoken language so often draw upon the social characteristics of imagined speakers (in this case the 'powerful') rather than offering a precise *linguistic* description.

5.2.3 Problematising 'Standard' and 'Nonstandard' English

It is clear that there have been differences in the way that 'standard' and 'nonstandard' English have been defined and positioned by educational policy makers / arbiters on the one hand and academic linguists on the other. However, we must also acknowledge that there are disagreements within the academy too, with some linguists treating 'standard English' as a discrete entity that can be clearly identified and described and others arguing that 'standard English' is an idealisation that has been discursively constructed. The debate between Hudson and Cushing highlights another difference too, between linguists who seek to be politically neutral and those who believe it is not possible to be apolitical when dealing with language in education, which by its very nature engages with intensely political concerns regarding social inequalities. Before exploring these differences, it is useful to begin with a point on which most can agree.

When it comes to the medium of writing in the English language, it is widely accepted that standard English is 'the dialectal variety that has been codified in dictionaries, grammars, and usage handbooks … [and] has been adapted by most major publishers internationally, resulting in a very high degree of uniformity among published English texts around the world' (Biber et al. 1999:18)[4]. Most would also agree that written standard English should be explicitly taught in schools. However, when it comes to speech the concept of a 'standard' is far from straightforward. The 'very high degree of uniformity' that can be achieved in written language can never be achieved in spoken language, which by its very

[4] However, this conception of standard written English makes no allowance for style, and thus there is still scope for disagreement. For example, when a literary author uses nonstandardised forms or expressions, is that considered 'nonstandard English'? Or is it explained as a matter of 'style'?

nature varies according to specific contexts of use. This leaves considerable scope for variation (and disagreement) when attempting to define something called 'spoken standard English'.

In the grammar glossary that appears at the end of the current curriculum framework, 'standard English' is defined thus:

> Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books*, *I did it* and *I wasn't doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most registers. The aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed in writing and in relatively formal speaking.
>
> (DfE 2014, p. 103-104)

This definition was authored by a linguist, Richard Hudson, and thus there is no slippage between standard English and correctness, nor is there any stigma attached to 'non-standard equivalents'; however, this passage demonstrates that it is difficult to give a precise linguistic description of standard English. As so often happens, standard English is defined negatively, as what it is *not* (i.e. it is not *non*standard English; see Crowley 2003:260) and illustrated with just a small set of prescribed forms. Cushing (2020b:465-6) critiques the definition further as 'a highly de-politicised version of Standard English' which 'evad[es] any recognition of the standard language ideology and its power'.

This ideological sidestepping has been a deliberate strategy for some linguists[5]. In a chapter written originally for the edited collection, *Standard English: the Widening Debate* (but updated in a 2011 online version), Peter Trudgill states clearly that his characterisation of Standard English 'will be specifically linguistic: the word "ideology" will not appear in this paper' (Trudgill 1999:118), and in a parenthetical comment, he makes it clear that he does 'not agree with the contention which is sometimes heard that "nobody speaks Standard English"' (p. 120). He offers instead a confident characterisation of Standard English as:

[5] Crystal (2006:206) also downplays the ideological nature of standardised English in schools, arguing that the national curriculum in England 'has totally rejected the prescriptive mentality' with standard English framed 'in an inclusive way'.

> ‘the variety of English normally used in writing, especially printing; it is the variety associated with the education system in all the English-speaking countries of the world, and is therefore the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as “educated” people.’
>
> (Trudgill 1999:118)

Spoken standard English is defined here not in linguistic terms but in terms of the level of education of its speakers. Crowley (1999, 2003) and Coupland (2000) have outlined the problems associated with using the criterion of ‘educatedness’; and, indeed, the scare-quotes suggest that Trudgill also recognises the need for some distancing from his use of the term. Nonetheless, the appeal to educatedness or related characteristics (for example, power, professionalism) is often made in discussions about ‘standard English’.

Crowley (2003) helps us to understand the historical processes through which the link between ‘standard English’ and characteristics such as ‘educatedness’ has been naturalised. He explains that by the mid-nineteenth century the term ‘standard language’ had achieved at least one clear use as ‘the uniform and commonly accepted national literary language’ (Crowley 2003:106). However, another use of the term was emerging and being applied to the spoken rather than the written language. Here the word ‘standard’ was used to refer to ‘a single form of speech that will replace diversity and variation’ (Crowley 2003:107). Clearly, this desired uniformity could not be achieved in practice because variation dominated spoken language in the nineteenth century as it does today. Crowley argues that it is for this reason that the spoken standard could not be defined in linguistic terms; it had to be defined instead ‘in terms of the social characteristics of its speakers’ (Crowley 2003:117). The spoken ‘standard’ thus came to be described as the language of ‘the educated’, the ‘well-bred’, the ‘civilised’ and the highest social class, and the term ‘standard’ took on a new meaning, ‘signifying a level of excellence to be reached and a quality to be emulated’ rather than a sense of uniformity (Crowley 2003:112). In reality, few (if any) speakers could realise this ‘standard’ perfectly in their everyday speech. Standard English in these terms was thus an ‘idealization of élite or at least establishment linguistic practice’ (Coupland 2000:624).

While the spoken ‘standard’ was discursively constructed in England as the language of the highest social classes, nonstandardised dialects were consequently associated with the lower classes. As I have argued elsewhere (Snell 2018a), when particular linguistic forms are ideologised in this way, as representative of particular types of people, they may be further construed as depicting, quite naturally, the qualities conventionally associated with those

people. Through this ideological process of ‘iconization’ (Irvine and Gal 2000) so-called ‘standard’ forms have come to be understood as emblematic of intelligence, competence, power and superior moral character, and nonstandard forms of the converse. This is why it has been possible for prominent figures in the language in education debate to equate speaking nonstandardised English with being ‘sloppy’ (Pascall, quoted above), ‘turning up filthy at school’ (Norman Tebbit, Radio 4, 1985, cited in Cameron 2012:94) and ‘joblessness’ (Michael Gove, speech delivered to an audience of teachers at Brighton College, 9th May 2013), as if these are natural consequences of failing to adhere to the ‘standard’.

James Milroy (1999) has also argued that standard languages (indeed any delimited varieties) are idealisations to which no speaker can ever truly conform, and thus that no one actually speaks a standard language. He writes that the idea of the standard is kept alive in speakers’ minds through channels such as the writing system and education in literacy, which he argues ‘equate the standard language – or what is believed to be the standard language – … with “correct’ usage in that language” (p. 18). For Milroy, this notion of correctness plays ‘a powerful role in the maintenance of the standard language ideology through prescription’ (1999:18). Likewise, Coupland (2000:624) points out that ‘[t]he centripetal ideology of SE [‘standard English’] today is based on the twin practices of publicly deprecating “incorrect” usage, and displaying and lobbying for “authoritative” usage, however selectively in linguistic terms’. This has been demonstrated in recent years in the letters sent home to parents by schools who have banned the use of nonstandardised dialect forms. An example can be seen in Figure 5.2.1, which is an image taken from a news report on a policy introduced by a primary school in Teesside (Williams 2013). It shows a letter that was sent to parents clearly proscribing eleven ‘incorrect’ usages and promoting alternative ‘correct’ usages. There is no explanation as to why these particular features of grammar and pronunciation have been selected and not others, but the overall message (reinforced by the opposing columns) is that some ways of speaking (those associated with the children’s own local dialect) are ‘incorrect’ while other ways of speaking (those associated with an educated ‘other’) are ‘correct’ (see Snell 2015 for further discussion). While blanket bans on nonstandardised dialect have been documented in only a small number of schools (Cushing [2020a] finds seven cases reported in the national media), these have been reported widely in

the national press, thus reinforcing (as well as replicating) discourses of correctness and the standard language ideology.[6]

...their literacy and to improve their result

If you hear your child saying the following phrases or words in the left hand column please correct the phrase or word in the right hand column. I'm sure if we tackle this problem together we will progress.

Incorrect	Correct
I **done** that	This should be, I **have done** that or I **did** that
I **seen** that	This should be, I **have seen** that or I **saw** that
Yous	The word you is NEVER plural e.g. we should say, "**You** lot come here!"
Dropping the 'th'	"School finishes at **free** fifteen," should be, "School finishes at **three** fifteen."
Gizit ere	Please **give** me **it**
I **Dunno**	This should be, I **don't know**
It's **nowt**	This should be, **it's nothing**
Letta, butta etc	**Letter, butter** etc
Your	Your late should be, **you're** late (You're is the shortened version of you are)
Werk, shert etc	I will wear my **shirt** for **work.**
He was **sat** there	He was **sitting** there

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Figure 5.2.1: Letter sent home to parents by a primary school in Teesside

Cushing's (2020a) notion that local school policies are influenced by national policy appears to be borne out in the Teesside case. When asked to comment on the rationale for the letter, the head teacher explained that 'the literacy framework asks children to write in standard English'. This school's policy was thus grounded in the requirements of the National Curriculum and the erroneous (though well intentioned) assumption that policing pupils' spoken language will help to drive up standards of literacy (see Section 5.2.4). The head teacher also told reporters that 'we would like to equip our children to go into the world of work and not be disadvantaged'. The notion that the prescriptive teaching of standard English will provide children with employment opportunities (and thus the potential for social mobility) is commonly invoked in debates about language in education, especially

[6] The headline for the Middlesbrough story was 'Primary school tells parents to stop children using slang phrases as it is preventing them from learning "standard' English"'. It is also important to recognise that dialect bans and other overt forms of language policing are not the default mode. Language policing materialises in covert and implicit ways as part of curricula, assessments, policies, and pedagogies which systematically reinforce the notion that there is only one 'correct' or 'academic' way of speaking. Covert language policing is at work where children are encouraged to leave their 'home' ways of speaking at the school gate and adopt more 'academic' or 'appropriate' speech in the classroom. As with dialect bans and overt correction of speech, the message here is: 'your ways of speaking are not suitable for school and other important domains, and thus are not valuable' (see Snell, fc in 2024).

when prevailing educational policy and practice is challenged[7] (see also Snell 2018a). However, J. Milroy (1999:21) argues that '[t]he effect of this "access to standard English" argument is not likely to be to benefit the underprivileged, but to maintain the authority of the canon of correct English', and thus uphold existing power structures.

In summary, some linguists treat 'standard English' and 'nonstandard' dialects as discrete entities that can be delineated and described. There are advantages to this approach. First, it clearly helps to draw boundaries around linguistic varieties for the purposes of formal linguistic description. Second, if linguists want to engage with educational policy makers and practitioners, it may make for a more productive relationship if we work with the same normative categories (such as 'standard English') that have currency in the educational domain; indeed, the aim of linguists such as Hudson has been to provide descriptions of standard English that are useful and practical for policy makers, teachers and pupils. However, this approach reinforces the categories of 'standard' and 'nonstandard' and their associated power structures without helping children to understand the social and historical processes that have created those structures (Pietikäinen 2016:268; Snell 2018a). While it is true that the definitions of 'standard English' that appear in the current curriculum do not directly propagate a prescriptive stance, by being selective in linguistic terms, as well as silent about the wider politics of standard English, these definitions inadvertently contribute to the processes through which nonstandardised English is seen as inferior. In contrast, linguists working within a language ideological framework treat categories such as 'standard English' as ideological processes rather than linguistic fact. Their aim is to expose, understand and challenge the forces and practices that have established, maintained and reinforced the ideology of the standard. These linguists (with whom I align) would argue that discussions of 'standard' and 'nonstandard' language in educational policies should recognise the social and political dimensions of 'standard English' and why it has come to hold such power, thus educating (and empowering) pupils to understand language attitudes and biases and how language is implicated in the maintenance of social inequalities. It is for these reasons that I prefer to use the terms standard*ised* and nonstandard*ised* English (and regret

[7] In response to Michael Rosen's critiques of the governments planned grammar, spelling and punctuation tests, Michael Gove (the then Secretary of State for Education) told an audience of teachers at Brighton College in May 2013: 'I could argue that nothing is more likely to condemn any young person to limited employment opportunities - or indeed joblessness - than illiteracy. … I could observe that it was a funny form of progressive thinking that held that the knowledge which elites have used to communicate with confidence and authority over the years - and which they pay to ensure their children can master - should be denied to the majority of children'. The full speech can be read online: https://politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2013/05/09/michael-gove-s-anti-mr-men-speech-in-full

previously using the uninflected forms in earlier writing), thus foregrounding standardisation as a process that requires continual work, to which we (as academic linguists) can either contribute or resist.

5.2.4 Nonstandardised English in Educational Practice

The need for children to develop competence in written standardised English is indisputable. However, there is little agreement on how to help children negotiate the differences between the grammar of their spoken language and that of written standardised English. As already noted, some schools have initiated policies that 'ban' nonstandardised grammar in pupils' spoken language with the assumption that this will improve literacy rates (Cushing 2020a; Snell 2018a). Yet, there is no evidence that the policing of oral language will help children conform to the conventions of written usage in standardised English. It is also unclear to what extent nonstandardised English in speech actually influences children's writing.

Early research (based on data gathered before the implementation of the National Curriculum in English) indicated that the impact of nonstandardised dialect in writing is relatively minor when compared with the mechanics of spelling and punctuation and the difficulties children have in negotiating the complexities of written (as opposed to spoken) structure (Williamson 1990, 1995; Williamson and Hardman 1997a, 1997b; see Snell and Andrews 2017 for a systematic review). This research also indicated that the use of nonstandardised dialect in written work decreases as pupils progress through school (Williamson and Hardman 1997b; Williams 1989a, 1989b). More recently, Constantinou and Chambers (2020) compared the incidence of nonstandardised grammar in the writing of 16-year-old students in 2004 and 2014 and found an increase over time, which they attribute to decreasing language awareness amongst students. Significantly, the six most common nonstandardised features did not change between 2004 and 2014, and these also overlapped with the features highlighted in Williamson's earlier work (for example, Williamson 1990, 1995; Williamson and Hardman 1997a, 1997b). This suggests that there may be a persistent core of nonstandardised forms that are more difficult to manage in writing (Williamson 1995:11; see also Hudson and Holmes 1995). Nonstandardised forms related to subject-verb agreement and past/past participle forms of irregular verbs were particularly intractable, and thus may warrant teachers' focused attention (Constantinou and Chambers 2020:7; Harris 1995:127; Williams 1989a:185; Williamson and Hardman 1997a:168).

However, these studies also highlight that some nonstandardised forms occur only in speech, and thus should not be the focus of attention for teachers whose aim is to improve pupils' written work. Constantinou and Chambers (2000:8) highlight five nonstandardised forms that did not occur at all in pupils writing in either the 2004 or 2014 corpus. Amongst these is the use of 'ain't' (as in, 'we *ain't* got enough'). Williams' study in Reading (1989a, 1989b, 2007) also found that working class pupils who used 'ain't' frequently in their speech did not use it at all in their written work. It appears that this form is clearly identified by young people as a feature only of speech and that these speakers are capable of switching between the standardised and nonstandardised form at school. This calls into question the value of teacher oral corrections of 'ain't' (as documented in Snell 2013:121-2). A second feature found to occur only in speech is the '[u]se of "us" after the imperative of verbs such as give, let and show, i.e. "*Give us!*"' (Constantinou and Chambers 2000:8). This is one of the eleven forms included in the Teesside letter ('Gizit' is a condensed form of 'Give us it', see Figure 5.2.1 and Snell 2015). A stated aim of this letter was to help pupils to develop their command of written standardised English, but, again, the likelihood is that 'Gizit' is exclusive to speech, and thus the ban will not help children to develop their writing. In addition, in my work with primary school children in Teesside, it became evident that singular 'us' was used only in very specific circumstances; when spoken commands/requests were issued amidst negotiations regarding status, hierarchy and inclusion/exclusion within the peer-group (see Snell 2013, 2015 for examples in context and further discussion). This form indexed meanings that were consequential to peer group interaction, and thus it is unlikely that children would stop using it just because their teachers (or parents) tell them to.

Ian Cushing and I found spoken dialect grammar to be relatively infrequent in pupils' writing in two schools in London and Leeds (Snell and Cushing 2022). We examined the English books of 65 nine to eleven-year-old pupils (approximately 140,000 words of writing) and found that nonstandardised grammar occurred at an average rate of just over one instance per thousand words. As in previous research, we also found that some of the forms routinely corrected in pupils' speech (such as *ain't*) did not occur in their writing at all. Despite these facts, teachers we interviewed in the Leeds school felt that their pupils' spoken language *did* affect the quality of their writing, explaining that they would correct their pupils' speech as well as their writing, at least on some occasions. Pupil focus groups reciprocated this, with pupils commenting on teacher corrective strategies, including one teacher who had instigated a 'ban' on words which were symbolic of spontaneous speech, such as 'like' and 'basically'.

We argue that teachers are sensitive to nonstandardised grammar in their pupils' speech, as well as their writing, because it is highlighted as an issue in educational policy and evaluative mechanisms (Snell and Cushing 2022:205-6). One such mechanism is the schools inspectorate, Ofsted. In related work (Cushing and Snell 2023), we constructed a digital database of 3,000 Ofsted school inspection reports published between 2000 and 2020 and searched this for phrases that were representative of different attitudes and ideologies about spoken language (such as 'speak clearly', 'correct grammar', 'fluent speech'). We found an overwhelming number of instances where inspectors made negative judgements about teacher and pupil speech they heard as 'nonstandard'. We also found that Ofsted reports often conflated speech and writing and promoted the unevidenced notion that talking in 'standard English' bears direct consequences on the development of pupils' literacy. We suggest that teachers have internalised these views, understanding it to be their role to model and promote standardised English in speech and believing that correcting pupils' oral language has pedagogical value in relation to developing their writing.

While existing research gives a good indication of the specific areas of nonstandardised grammar that should be prioritised in developing written standardised English (for example, the verb phrase), these studies do not offer guidance on grammar pedagogies, nor do they consider the nature and impact of teacher responses. This is a significant gap, given that researchers have called into question the efficacy of teacher corrections of nonstandardised grammar in writing. The work of Cheshire (1982a, 1982b) and Williams (1989a, 1989b, 2007) in Reading indicated that teachers did not have a clear concept of what constituted local dialect in Reading nor a 'consistent policy for dealing with non-standard forms that occurred in children's work' (Williams 1989a:194). Differences in approach were noted not just between teachers but also within a single teacher's marking practices: nonstandardised dialect forms were corrected in some cases but not others, leading to confusion for children. Williams (1989a:196) also found that teacher corrections often lacked explanation, which in some cases led to hypercorrection on the part of pupils. Further work is required in order to develop a consistent and transparent strategy in dealing with the use of nonstandardised dialect in writing if we are to avoid creating unintended confusion and anxiety for the learner, which may extend into adult life (Harris 1995). More productive and descriptive approaches to writing (for example, Myhill 2021) have shown the power in conceptualising grammar as a series of choices to be made, as opposed to prescriptive rules.

Research has shown that pupils are capable of style-switching in their speech as well as between speech and writing. Crinson and Williamson (2004) studied the use of

nonstandardised English in the formal and informal speech of 15-year-olds from two schools in Tyneside. They found that the middle-class students used almost no nonstandardised grammar in their speech in formal contexts. Significantly, the incidence of nonstandardised forms in the formal speech of students from less privileged backgrounds was also very low (an average of 3.5 nonstandardised grammatical features per 30 minutes of conversation). In informal contexts, this increased to around 8 or 9 features. The key point is that these pupils were capable of style-shifting in line with curriculum guidance which states that children should be able to distinguish between formal and informal contexts when choosing appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, it is important to acknowledge that the stylistic potential of nonstandardised grammar extends beyond formality. Sociolinguistic research has shown that features of nonstandardised grammar can index stances, attitudes and identities, in addition to social or regional category memberships (Cheshire 1982a; Coupland 2007; Ioannidou 2009; Moore and Podesva 2009; Moore 2012, 2021; Rampton 2006, Snell 2010, 2018b). Most sociolinguistic research on style has focused on the speech of adolescents, but research in Teesside has shown that nine to ten-year-old children are strategic in their style-shifting, using nonstandardised grammar to negotiate relationships and peer-group identities (for example, Snell 2010, 2013, 2018b). Some of the nonstandardised forms in these children's repertoires conveyed specific social and pragmatic meanings not carried by the standardised alternatives (see Snell 2010 on possessive 'me'; Snell 2013, 2015 on singular 'us'; and Snell 2018b on right dislocated pronoun tags); and speakers selected the forms/meanings most appropriate to their immediate interactional goals. We must recognise, then, that children's repertoires are complex and that children meaningfully switch between standardised and nonstandardised forms.

Professionals and public figures also sometimes use nonstandardised grammar strategically, even in formal speech. For example, during a televised interview about the government's Brexit deal in 2019, Michael Gove, a government Minister, told the interviewer: "That ain't gonna happen … There ain't gonna be no second referendum." Moore (2019) suggests that Gove's use of nonstandardised negation serves not only to emphasise his commitment to the point he is making, but also to communicate his desire to be seen as 'straight-talking' and 'resilient' (characteristics associated with the working-class speakers who typically use nonstandardised grammar). As Moore points out, this example demonstrates the flexibility and utility of nonstandardised grammatical forms, which 'allow us to communicate our feelings or stances concisely'. In addition, Moore argues that the example calls into question the idea propagated by the National Curriculum that 'Standard

English … covers most registers' (DfE 2014:104). Clearly, even those whose language is most closely associated with standardised English (such as the government minister who presided over changes introduced in the 2014 National Curriculum) sometimes find it useful to exploit the stylistic potential of nonstandardised grammar.

In the classroom, nonstandardised grammar is not typically recognised as a stylistic resource. As already noted, it is common practice for teachers to correct pupils' use of nonstandardised forms in speech as well as in writing. Cheshire and Edwards (1991:230) argue that oral correction is 'a waste of time and […] likely to lead to confusion about the linguistic relationship between features of standard and nonstandard English', with persistent corrections potentially leading to 'reticence in oral work and even, in extreme cases, to alienation from the school' (see also Cox 1991:32, 128). I have not found any UK-based research that has systematically analysed the function and impact of oral corrections but work outside of the UK highlights issues associated with this pedagogic strategy. In Godley, Carpenter and Werner's (2007) study of grammar instruction in an urban (and predominantly African American) 10th grade English class, the focal students expressed discomfort with their teacher's insistence that they speak only standardised English in class, and two of the eleven students interviewed said that they tried not to speak at all to avoid being corrected. In a study that explored the tensions between Standard Modern Greek and Greek Cypriot Dialect in Greek Cypriot primary classroom, Ioannidou (2009:275) noted that students 'were interrupted, corrected and failed to be praised for providing the correct answer simply because they, either by choice or necessity, decided to convey the meaning in their own variety' (see also Netz and Lefstein (2018) for corrections in Israeli classrooms).

Sociolinguistic research suggests that oral corrections and negative views about nonstandardised dialects can produce feelings of linguistic insecurity and have detrimental effects on speakers' confidence, motivation, and participation in class discussion (Cheshire 1982b; MacRuairc 2011a, 2011b; Snell 2013; Trudgill 1975; Williams 1989, 2007). Where low value is accorded to nonstandardised speech in the classroom, some pupils may become less confident in oral expression and thus reluctant to contribute to whole class discussion (Snell 2013, 2019). This is a problem for teaching and learning across the whole curriculum because educational research has shown that participation in high quality classroom discussion is crucial to learning and cognitive development (for example, Alexander 2020; Mercer 2008; Lefstein and Snell 2014; Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke 2015; see also section 5.2.5 below). In addition, there are consequences for pupils' developing identities. Pupils who speak a nonstandardised dialect may experience conflict in trying to be a 'good pupil'

(where this requires displays of competence in standardised English) while also retaining other aspects of their identity (for example, ‘popular boy’) and expressing loyalty to neighbourhood, family and peer-group. This is significant because there is evidence from learning theory and studies of classroom practice that identity is of critical importance to the learning process (for example, Wortham 2006). Some children will be successful in negotiating identity conflicts, but others may become alienated from school and the educational opportunities it offers (Piestrup 1973:170; Willis 1977; MacRuaric 2011b).

In summary, there is a widely held perception in educational policy and practice that nonstandardised speech is a barrier to the development of literacy. However, research shows that this is not the case. The use of nonstandardised grammar in writing is relatively insignificant compared with the difficulties all children face in developing command over the complexities of written compared to spoken structure; the incidence of nonstandardised forms in writing is lower than in speech and decreases as speakers progress through school; some nonstandardised forms commonly corrected in speech do not occur in writing at all; and, in spoken interaction, children are flexible language users who manipulate variation for strategic effect. Despite the research evidence, the narrative that nonstandardised speech is a problem persists in educational policy and evaluative mechanisms, and this drives pedagogic practice that is detrimental to pupil confidence and classroom discussion.

5.2.5 The Role of Sociolinguists in Educational Debates

Since the 1970s, sociolinguists have sought to counter negative and ‘subjective’ evaluations of nonstandardised dialects of English with ‘objective’ linguistic facts (Labov 1982). Following Labov’s (1969) defense of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the US, British sociolinguists have argued that nonstandardised dialects are as systematic, logical and rule-bound as standardised English; they simply have a different set of rules (for example, Trudgill 1975, 1999). Thus, the *different-but-equal* approach has become the default mode for countering prejudice against nonstandardised varieties, including in educational contexts. These arguments have been rehearsed in public forums like Twitter, with linguists arguing against news stories and comments that marginalise nonstandardised dialects and calling for attitudinal change. Nonetheless, negative perceptions of nonstandardised dialects persist, despite almost 50 years of this kind of sociolinguistic advocacy.

A key issue is that different-but-equal arguments have tended to ignore (presumably strategically) the wider cultural and ideological politics of standardised English in a bid to stick to linguistic 'facts' and thus make claims for scientific objectivity (recall Trudgill's [1999] insistence that he would not use the word 'ideology'). But, as others have pointed out, this is a fallacy:

> Of course, this [that all languages are equal] is not 'a fact', and it is not 'scientific': it is not possible to demonstrate empirically that forms of language are either equal or unequal, or even that 'some are more equal than others' purely as linguistic objects. A claim of this sort is ideological, just as the claims that are made against it are ideological, and it is unwise for linguists to make public claims about linguistic equality unless they are aware that such claims will be interpreted as ideological.
>
> (Milroy 1999:23; see also Coupland 2000:V)

As Milroy indicates, members of the public tend to see through claims for 'objectivity' and 'scientific detachment' (Labov 1982:166), especially as they know very well that nonstandardised dialects are not *socially* equal to standardised English (Snell 2015, 2018). Efforts to address negative attitudes to nonstandardised English that rely on different-but-equal arguments may thus appear disingenuous because they fail to acknowledge the social and political conditions under which the educational focus on standardised English and the policing of nonstandardised forms makes sense to many teachers, pupils, and parents.

An ideological approach prompts us to reflect critically on taken-for-granted assumptions in our discipline and consider how these may actually constrain contributions to social change (Lewis 2018:339). Different-but-equal arguments are premised on the assumption that nonstandardised dialects of English are discrete linguistic systems with their own set of rules. This presupposes that there is a spoken 'standard English' against which a variety called 'Teesside English', or any other 'nonstandard' variety, can be evaluated. The focus on discrete language systems makes it difficult for us to then argue *against* those who suggest that for children to acquire standardised English they must first stop using features of their local dialect (as in the nonstandardised dialect bans discussed above), because these initiatives are also premised on the assumption that 'standard' and 'nonstandard' varieties are different linguistic systems which are thus in competition with each other.

Woolard has made the point that we can only counter misconceptions about language when we have understood how they are socially produced and accepted as convincing and

effective (Woolard 1998:10). A language ideological approach is useful in this regard because it helps us to uncover and challenge the 'stock arguments' (Blommaert 1999:10) that have perpetuated standard language ideology, such as the notion that speaking 'standard English' will help working-class children achieve employment success and social mobility, which is as pervasive in education debates as it is misleading (see also Snell 2018a). The link between language use and upward social mobility can only be made if we view standardised English as a set of objective linguistic practices that can be neatly delineated and thus acquired and exploited. As already noted, research has indicated that this is not the case. US scholars working within the field of raciolinguistics have made the case that institutional assessments of what constitutes 'standard' versus 'non-standard' language (or 'school' versus 'home') are really measures of how well a student is able to embody particular subject positions – for example, 'idealised whiteness' – rather than empirical linguistic practices (Rosa and Flores 2017: 633; see also Alim, Rickford and Ball, 2016; Smitherman 2017; Rosa 2018; Baker-Bell 2020). Flores and Rosa (2015: 150) argue that raciolinguistic ideologies work to position racialised bodies as linguistically deficient unrelated to any objective linguistic practice. Raciolinguistic and standard language ideologies thus work to privilege white middle-class speakers, who can deviate from language practices idealised as 'standard' or 'appropriate' without stigma, while discriminating against racialised speakers, who 'can adhere to these idealised linguistic practices and still face profound institutional exclusion' (Flores and Rosa 2015: 165). From this perspective, it is nonsensical to suggest that modifying the language of marginalised speakers is the key to promoting social mobility. As Flores and Rosa put it:

> Simply adding "codes of power" or other "appropriate" forms of language to the linguistic repertoire of language-minoritized students will not lead to social transformation […because] they are still heard as deficient language users. Attempting to teach language-minoritised students to engage in the idealized linguistic practices of the white speaking subject does nothing to challenge the underlying racism and monoglossic language ideologies of the white listening subject.
>
> (Flores and Rosa 2015: 167)

In other words, while society demands that marginalised speakers learn standardised English to advance in education and the public domain, it continues to find their linguistic performances wanting while rewarding white middle- and upper-class speakers whose language does not conform to an idealised 'standard'. It is in this sense that educational

policies and prescriptions on 'standard English' become 'gate-keeping mechanisms that reproduce both the experience and the social effect of stratification and inequality' (Gal 2016:459). The problem thus cannot be found and remedied within individual speakers, but rather within state structures and institutions.

In summary, a language ideological approach to challenging negative attitudes about nonstandardised language in education would include interrogating our own disciplinary assumptions as well as addressing the wider cultural politics of standard English and its role in masking the inequalities of race and class that are baked into our educational institutions. But, in addition, if we are to have real impact in the educational domain, we need to adapt our arguments in ways that are recognised as helpful by educational practitioners (Lefstein and Israeli 2015:205). In this regard, Cameron (2012:115) recommends that we should seek 'not to deny the importance of standards and values but to focus critically on the particular standards and values being invoked and to propose alternatives'[8]. In other words, we must take care not to give the impression that we are opposed to standards of excellence in language education; rather we should replace the superficial focus on 'correctness' with more productive approaches that help children to cultivate their spoken and written repertoires. Related to this, I would suggest that we also need to make a distinction between 'talk for performance' and 'talk for learning' when discussing spoken language in education (Snell 2019). The National Curriculum requires that pupils develop the skills necessary to give speeches and presentations and participate in structured debate. Within these formal and semi-scripted speech events – i.e. talk as performance – it may be appropriate to encourage pupils to minimise fillers and avoid grammatical forms stigmatised as 'nonstandard', unless used for rhetorical effect (provided adequate explanation is given as to *why* these forms are devalued in the public domain). However, when it comes to talk for learning, the aim is to think aloud and contribute spontaneously to an evolving argument. There is no reason why such contributions should be made in standardisd English (even if we could agree what this means when it comes to speech), because it is possible to express complex ideas in a variety of linguistic forms and styles. This an important point because educational research on talk-

[8] This point is important in relation to current UK policy discussions around oracy, such as the announcement made in July 2023 by the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer, that a Labour government would 'raise the importance of speaking skills, oracy, as some academics call it […and] weave oracy through a new National Curriculum that finally closes the gap between learning and life' (Speech delivered at Mid Kent College, Gillingham, 6th July 2023). In some of the news reporting around this speech, oracy was equated with 'the ability to speak well in grammatically correct sentences' (Freddie Hayward at *The New Statesman*). It is important that academics challenge this reductive take on oracy while still supporting the idea that spoken language is important to children's education.

intensive (or ‘dialogic’) pedagogies has demonstrated that children who participate in rich and challenging classroom discussion make greater progress (based on performance in standardised tests) than their peers who have not had this experience (for example, Alexander 2018; Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke 2015). Moreover, a recent large-scale dialogic teaching intervention based in the UK has shown that the increase in achievement is even more dramatic for pupils on free school meals (used as a measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage) (Alexander 2018, 2020), thus highlighting the importance of classroom talk to social mobility. Drawing together sociolinguistic research on language variation with educational research on dialogic pedagogies, we can make the case that: (i) the obligation to use standardised English in informal classroom discussion (which is an official requirement at KS3) and the policing of nonstandardised speech in the classroom will likely discourage some pupils from participating; (ii) pupils who do not regularly participate in classroom discussion will miss out on the dialogic exchanges that are crucial to learning and cognitive development; and (iii) this will disproportionately impact the most disadvantaged pupils, who are most likely to speak a local dialect and who also stand to gain the most by being given regular opportunities to participate in productive classroom discussion and thus to exploit the power of talk for learning.

5.2.6 Conclusion

The treatment of nonstandardised language in education has been a focus of sociolinguistic attention for at least the last five decades. In this chapter I have highlighted some of the issues and tensions that have emerged as part of the debate, focusing in particular on the way ‘standard English’ is conceptualised either as a discrete entity that can be neatly delineated and described or as an idealisation of elite linguistic practice that is reinforced and maintained through the workings of standard language ideology. Clearly, careful linguistic analysis of children’s speech and writing is crucial to educational debates about language. However, it is not productive to attempt a purely linguistic, non-ideological approach in debates about nonstandardised English in education, not least because standard language ideology is clearly dominant in the actions of politicians, Ofsted, and schools, and in the media reporting of these. We need a critical, ideological perspective in order to understand and challenge the ways in which language is implicated in the gate-keeping encounters that routinely reproduce educational inequalities. This includes educational prescriptions on spoken language, as well as class and racial bias embedded in curricula documents and high-

stakes examinations (see for example, Johnson 2015). Further, once we move away from the notion that discrete, bounded varieties of English exist as sociolinguistic 'realities', it becomes possible to show that children's language repertoires *already* include forms that are conventionally associated with schools' prescribed 'standards' *alongside* local dialect forms and a range of other semiotic resources (Snell 2013, 2015), and thus that the focus should be on extending children's repertoires.

It is clear that we need a more comprehensive and evidence-based approach to 'standards', style and language variation in the National Curriculum. Approaches to spoken language at school should recognise that it is not possible to achieve uniformity in speech and it is precisely that lack of uniformity that opens up opportunities for stylistic variation. Speaking always involves making choices; understanding the impact of these choices gives us control, enabling us to style ourselves linguistically in multiple different ways. Pupils should therefore have the opportunity to learn about their local dialect and its relationship to standardised English and be encouraged to reflect on their language choices and abilities. Teacher professional development should include 'knowledge about language' (as advocated some time ago by LINC). It is important that teachers and pupils gain an awareness of the full potential of spoken language, including an understanding of regional, social and stylistic variation; and the relationship between speech and writing. Valuing the language resources pupils use at home and making them a legitimate object of study is likely to develop pupils' confidence and make them more likely to participate in class discussion, which will have benefits for their learning across the curriculum.

There is still a significant gap between the kind of robust and convincing research that can be reported in academic publications and significant impact within educational policy and practice. We thus need to continue to think seriously about how best to disseminate sociolinguistic research outside of academia and how we can work productively with educational practitioners and policy makers to shape the way nonstandardised English is viewed and treated in education. While research which seeks to counter negative attitudes by validating and legitimising nonstandardised language continues to be important, we must also take heed of scholars such Rosa and Flores (2017) and Lewis (2018) (see also Block 2014, 2018) who have argued that future work must also highlight and address the structural inequalities and injustices that are the true cause of educational underachievement in low-income, working class and racialised pupils, if we are to effect real and lasting change.

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