

WHERE DO STANDARD LANGUAGES COME FROM? POWER, PRINT AND NATIONS

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1. Introduction

Amongst the many current debates surrounding the emergence of World Englishes, the ownership of English, and English as a Lingua Franca (e.g. World Englishes GISIG Fielded Discussion, Newsletter 16), I thought it might be interesting to discuss how standard languages might have emerged in the first place. I also briefly consider what, if anything, this discussion might offer us as teachers. As the title makes clear, standard languages have as their foundation issues of power, often drawn from the early capitalism of printing, and/or nationalism.

2. What is a language? What is a dialect?

It is, of course, difficult to provide clear-cut definitions for *language* and *dialect*. Languages are social phenomenon and do not necessarily have clear edges that would make them easy to identify and define. We can make generalizations about language (e.g. language is a dialect with an army, language is always superior to the dialects it encapsulates), but these refer to social, political, and cultural factors, rather than any intrinsic concrete and rational evaluation of the linguistic features of the “language” itself. One possible definition of language which recognizes these difficulties is:

a [linguistic] system of elements and rules conceived broadly enough to admit variant ways of using it. A dialect is understood as one of these variant ways. (Joseph, 1987:1)

However, this still leaves language as an inexact term as dialects too can be systems, and it seems that the perceived importance to the user of a language/dialect is what actually resolves whether a language or dialect is being spoken. For the remainder of this article, I shall refer to pre-standardized and non-standardized forms of language as vernaculars.

Language standardization is the process by which a vernacular in a community becomes the standard language (SL) form. This carries implicit elements of prestige (whereby the SL vernacular is valued more highly than others), stability, and common usage. Alternative variations are either eliminated and/or stigmatized.

3. The Pre-capitalist Era:

Truth Languages and Dynasties Prior to 1450 CE, standardization was slow, if it took place at all. Clear local vernaculars were present and remained relatively unaffected by standardized change as *diglossia* - two varieties of language coexisting in a single community, each with a defined function, usage and therefore prestige - was prevalent. For example, in England, there was an era during which a high prestige, imposed foreign language of a ruling class (French) co-existed with a low status native language (English). Change and standardization is not a defining feature of diglossia.

This was also the era of what Anderson (1991) calls ‘truth languages’, whereby one overwhelming language (Church Latin in Europe, Qur’anic Arabic in Islam) represented the truth, the truth being God/Allah’s word. Only these languages had God-given purity. As the focus of learning, truth languages were at the apex of societies which encompassed swathes of geographical, cultural, and dynastic identities, and a vast associated variety of vernaculars. These existed free from political, ideological, or other planned interference

However, such systems of religious supremacy and certainty did not last. Intellectual and geographical exploration led to the discovery of “the other” (other religions, other cultures etc.), and thus to the relativisation of religion from “the truth” to “the truest” (Anderson, 1991). Geographical competition between religions led to the formation of more clearly delineated territorial spheres of influence as the age of religion passed into the era of dynasty. Monarchs

became ideologically supreme in politics, culture, and allegiance (religion of course remained a major influence).

Expanding their realm through war and marital alliance, monarchs ruled over heterogeneous populations with which they had very little real contact. These were sometimes areas that contained massive local variation and where intra-realm communication amongst the population would have been impossible, except amongst the ruling classes who developed “administrative vernaculars” to communicate about matters of state and other functions. Again, this was not a planned process of standardization as speakers of local vernaculars were often ruled by those from abroad who showed no interest in ensuring linguistic unity amongst the population. (Hence, an English vernacular was not used by the rulers of England for 200 years from the Norman Invasion of 1066 (as mentioned), whilst local vernaculars thrived).

4. Print Capitalism and language standardisation

However, the arrival of *print capitalism* and widespread written language revolutionized both language use, and eventually ideas of nation and nationality. Print capitalism supported the necessary development of writing in society, producing what Milroy and Milroy (1991) call a “quantum leap” in language standardization, certainly for European languages. (This discussion concentrates on Europe where most writers have focused. Elsewhere, absolutism and/or the absence of technological development during these years probably prevented the processes described).

4.1 The Initial Effects of Printing

Printing presses were in use in Europe by the mid-15th century. Printing enabled planned utterances to be devised and circulated. Communication was no longer limited to formulaic administration, religious tracts, or spontaneous speech. Ideas and theories were propagated, especially concerning religion. With the invention of the printing press, written ideas could be reproduced on a massive scale, not only in the Church Latin that was the traditional language of European religion, but in vernaculars that could be more widely understood. Printers saw an opportunity to both establish the success of their trade and make money, whilst those involved in the religious arguments could enlarge their appeal. Thus, it is no surprise that Luther “became the first best-selling author...in the coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism” (Anderson, 1991:39), authoring one-third of all books sold in the German vernacular between 1518 and 1535.

Print languages affected the variety of vernaculars used in a particular community. Mass-produced written texts started to provide fixed language forms, giving a degree of permanence to new norms and preventing extreme language change and diversity. Print languages were inclusive for those who could read them, whilst excluding those who could not; and they were delimited geographically, initializing a geographical sense of “us” and “other” for people and places.

4.2 A Theory of Language Standardisation

Haugen (1964) suggests a four-stage model for the development of language standardization. The initial **selection** of a single vernacular was important so that printers could ensure that their texts were comprehensible to all readers at all times in all places within the community. This enabled a broad market to develop, and the cutting of costs (i.e. maximise profits) by facilitating mass production.

However, which vernacular to choose? For those producing the texts, it was reasonable to use the language they spoke (or was spoken in their geographical and social community). For example, in the case of England, the vernacular chosen as the vehicle of print capitalism was the language used by the London-based, emergent entrepreneurial and merchant class. Printed materials spread this vernacular into areas where it was previously unknown and unused.

The original choice of the print vernacular/language might have been free from a conscious consideration of power-relations; however, not only did the print language gain prestige from being selected and spread, but it was also the language of those with money, power, and influence within the community as a whole, and could be seen to be so. Thus, those whose

vernacular was adopted were placed at a considerable advantage in both practical usage and prestige terms in the wider print community.

The selected language then required **codification** and **elaboration**, aiming at a minimal variation and stability in linguistic form (e.g. one spelling for each word). This was undermined by non-standard vernaculars. Meanwhile, elaboration required the language to perform all the functions of the lower prestige vernaculars it was starting to overwhelm. To achieve this, it could borrow from them.

Finally, Haugen says, the key to the overall process of successful language standardization was, and in areas where it is a continuing process today is, **acceptance** whereby the standardized form can be easily implemented and maintained without challenge from another vernacular.

5. Nationalism and language standardisation

So far, processes of standardization seem to have benefited the powerful in society, but were not developed with a linguistic, ideological, or state target in mind. Communities were unified by language, also creating an awareness of "others", but this was not ideologically manipulated. The advent of nationalism changed this.

Nationalism has clear roots in the development of print-capitalism, but takes them one step further. Emerging in the 17th century and lasting through to the present day, the idea of nations and nationhood highlights difference, using it to create what Anderson calls "imagined communities". Ethnic groups (nations) become the focus of legitimacy, controlling their own destiny by governing themselves in their own unique territory. Nations thus become the most effective unit of international politics, and can act at their most efficient if they have internal cohesion.

Nairn proposes that nationalism is geographically a 'modern Janus' (Nairn, 1977: pp329-363). Nations look both inwards and outwards, emphasizing internal similarities and differences with what lies 'outside'. Clearly many factors contribute to this sense of nation - the development of a national character, a national culture, a history, and often a national language. Unlike in the previous era I have described, national languages are often used *consciously* as tools, facilitators, and weapons in creating internal unity and external differentiation.

Thus Joseph (1987:72-83) proposes several ways in which the SL provides inclusivity within a nation. It is primarily a national symbol, one that can be linked to a permanent past much more easily than often changing geographical boundaries, especially for newer nations. It can also be used as a symbol of formality and solemnity. It replaces the older administrative dialects to provide a more general *lingua franca* function, helping the internal cohesion of the state, and performs various nation-forming functions such as in literature, broadcasting, education, etc. How have these processes operated in practice?

5.1 Language and Early Nationalism...

The American and French Revolutions are often identified as starting points for early nationalism (1776 and 1789 respectively). The American Revolution can be visualised as an anti-metropolitan war between speakers of the same language (English), American states resisting English domination. As a result, vernaculars did not divide the two sides in the conflict but, as Anderson (1991) maintains, it did serve to unify the American community through the circulation of news and newspapers over a wide geographical area. Similarly the French Revolution did not focus on language divisions until after its success was assured. Then, however, a vast process of language standardization took place in an attempt to unify the nation against outside threats, both perceived and real, culminating in the *Académie Française*, still the current guardian of a standardized French language.

5.2 ...and to the Present Day

Issues of power surrounding language standardization and standard languages continue to affect the modern world. Firstly, the after-effects of the age of imperialism continue to be felt. Ethnic groups originating in former imperial powers colonized and settled in the dominions,

while continuing to use the prestigious imperial language. Following independence, many have found themselves members of a nation-state that is not truly theirs, and unable to speak the newly chosen/re-emerged national language (e.g. the Russian populations of the Baltic states).

Alternatively, in newly independent states, there is the crucial issue of what administrative language to adopt, and whether or not to use this as a national symbol. Often, in multi-ethnic, post-colonial states the language of the original imperial power is maintained as the language of administration. This both provides an arguably “neutral” standard which does not belong to any one ethnic group within the state, and is already known by the bureaucratic elites who administer the state. That is not to suggest that this is an easy process, given the historical connotations that these languages carry, but nationalism seems not to focus on language as a key issue.

A further legacy of imperialism is the process of immigration from former colonies into the ex-colonizer. This leads to an influx of non-native languages and speakers, who, in terms of my examination of prestige carry low status. This situation may restrict the access of those whose language is not standardized to state facilities.

The continuing role of language, nationalism, and state formation can also be seen in non-imperial situations. Thus there are increasing differences between what are now known as the standard Czech and Slovakian languages following the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Finally, the insistence on “one nation, one language” continues in many places. Thus the suppression of dissident ethnic groups occurs in conjunction with the suppression of their language, either overtly through coercion or more covertly through education policies

6. Taking Stock

Although a common process for several centuries, language standardization is not a “natural” process. It was driven first by print-capitalism, and more recently by nationalism, moving language from being a spoken local identifier to being a written and spoken form of national identity. Language standardization thus raises issues of power and prestige, both within and between communities.

From the late 17th century, standardization and national languages have played a crucial role in the legitimacy of the nation-state. Through a symbiotic relationship, national identity has created national standard languages, and standard language use has created national identities.

Despite the historical perspective of this article, language standardization also has major current social implications. Standard and national languages have become a site of struggle - symbols of unity and domination against forms of resistance. Languages are social phenomenon; languages do not have interests but people do.

7. Bringing the debate back to the classroom

I think much of the above discussion has relevance to teachers of English, both as interesting and useful context, but also as a source of classroom content. Of course, it is also an issue that needs to be approached carefully, touching as it does on issues of social and national identity.

For example, as a teacher, I might consider how ‘standard’ my own English is and does this matter in my teaching – both to myself and to the learners? The emphasis on spoken communication in much ELT makes this a particularly interesting issue.

Language and language standardization is also a topic which opens up a whole array of political, social and cultural issues for learners to examine as a part of, and as a vehicle for, their language learning. The question of what has happened to other languages in the UK (e.g. Cornish, Manx, Welsh) has often provoked interest amongst my students, and has led to an examination of similar situations in learners’ own countries. Similarly, touching on ideas such as diglossia, and different functions for different languages/vernaculars/dialects in different countries has also raised interesting questions of why people are learning English and what they might use it for.

These are, of course, challenging issues and can lead to often uncomfortable questions which touch on the role of the English language and English language teaching in the world. Nevertheless, they can also stimulate learners (and teachers!) and produce meaningful and stimulating classroom learning.

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