

Henry G. Widdowson: The Ownership of English (1993)

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[...] I want to talk about how the English we teach is to be defined and how this is related to its position as an international language.

To start with, who determines the demarcation of the subject itself? We are teaching English and the general assumption is that our purpose is to develop in students a proficiency which approximates as closely as possible to that of native speakers. But who are these native speakers?

The English perhaps. And why not? A modest proposal. England is where the language originated and this is where the English live. The language and the people are bound together by both morphology and history. So they can legitimately lay claim to this linguistic territory. It belongs to them. And they are the custodians. If you want real or proper English, this is where it is to be found, preserved and listed like a property of the National Trust.

Of course, English of a kind is found elsewhere as well, still spreading, a luxuriant growth from imperial seed. Seeded among other people but not ceded to them. At least not completely. For the English still cling tenaciously to their property and try to protect it from abuse. Let us acknowledge (let us concede) that there are other kinds of English, offshoots and outgrowths, but they are not real or proper English, not the genuine article.

As an analogy, consider the French. They have, until just recently, successfully denied others the right to use the appellation 'Champagne' for any wine that does not come from the region of that name, where Dom Perignon first invented it. There may be all kinds of derivative versions elsewhere, excellent no doubt in their way, but they are not real or proper Champagne, even though loose talk may refer to them as such. Similarly, there is real English, *Anglais réal*, Royal Eng-

lish, Queen's English, or (for those unsympathetic to the monarchy) Oxford English. The vintage language.

I do not imagine that such a view would gain much support in present company. The response is more likely to be outrage. You cannot be serious. Well, not entirely, it is true. As I have expressed it, in somewhat extravagant terms, this position is one which very few people would associate themselves with. It is reactionary, arrogant, totally unacceptable. And the argument is patently absurd. Perhaps as I have expressed it. But then why is it absurd? The particular associations of England, Queen and country and Colonel Blimp which I invoked to demonstrate the argument also in some respects disguise it. If we now remove the position from these associations and strip the argument down to its essential tenets, is it so readily dismissed? Is it indeed so uncommon after all? I want to suggest that the ideas and attitudes which I have presented in burlesque are still very much with us in a different and less obvious guise.

To return briefly to Champagne. One argument frequently advanced for being protective of its good name has to do with quality assurance. The label is a guarantee of quality. If any Tom, Dick or Harry producing fizzy wine is free to use it, there can be no quality control. Recently an English firm won a court case enabling it to put Champagne on its bottles containing a non-alcoholic beverage made from elderflowers. The Champagne lobby was outraged. Here, they said, was the thin end of the wedge. Before long, the label would be appearing on bottles all over the place containing concoctions of all kinds calling themselves Champagne, and so laying claim to its quality. The *appellation* would not be *controlée*. Standards were at stake.

They have a point. And the same point is frequently made about English. In this case, you cannot, of course, preserve exclusive use of the name and, indeed, it would work against your interests to do so (of which more later), but you can seek to preserve standards by implying that there is an exclusive quality in your own brand of English, aptly called 'standard English'. What is this quality, then? What are these standards?

The usual answer is quality of clear communication and standards of intelligibility. With standard English, it is argued, these are assured. If the language disperses into different forms, a myriad of Englishes,

then it ceases to serve as a means of international communication; in which case the point of learning it largely disappears. As the language spreads, there are bound to be changes out on the periphery; so much can be conceded. But these changes must be seen not only as peripheral but as radial also, and traceable back to the stable centre of the standard. If this centre does not hold, things fall apart, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Back to Babel.

In itself, this argument sounds plausible; and it is difficult to refute. But for all that, there is something about it which is suspect. Let us replay it again. Standard English promotes the cause of international communication so we must maintain the central stability of the standard as the common linguistic frame of reference.

To begin with, who are 'we'? Obviously the promoters of standard English must themselves have standard English at their disposal. But to maintain it is another matter. This presupposes authority. And this authority is claimed by those who possess the language by primogeniture and due of birth, as Shakespeare puts it. In other words, the native speakers. They do not have to be English, of course. That would be too restrictive a condition, and one it would be tactless to propose, but they have to be to the language born. Not all native speakers, you understand. In fact, come to think of it, not most native speakers, for the majority of those who are to the language born speak non-standard English, and have themselves to be instructed in the standard at school. We cannot have any Tom, Dick or Harry claiming authority, for Tom, Dick and Harry are likely to be speakers of some dialect or other. So the authority to maintain the standard language is not consequent on a natural native speaker endowment. It is claimed by a minority of people who have the power to impose it. The custodians of standard English are self-elected members of a rather exclusive club. Now it is important to be clear that in saying this, I am not arguing against standard English. You can accept the argument for language maintenance, as indeed I do, without accepting the authority that claims the right to maintain it. It is, I think, very generally assumed that a particular subset of educated native speakers have the natural entitlement to custody of the language. That the preservation of its integrity is in their hands: their right and their responsibility. It is this which I wish to question. Not in any spirit of radical rebellion against

authority as such, but because I think such questioning raises a number of crucial issues about the learning and teaching of the language.

Consideration of who the custodians are leads logically on to a consideration of what it is exactly that is in their custody. What is standard English? The usual way of defining it is in reference to its grammar and lexis: it is a variety, a kind of superposed dialect which is socially sanctioned for institutional use, and therefore particularly well suited to written communication. In its spoken form it can be manifested by any accent. So it is generally conceded that standard English has no distinctive phonology. The same concession is not, however, extended to its graphology. On the contrary, it is deviant spelling which, in Britain at least, is most frequently singled out for condemnation. There is something of a contradiction here. If standard English is defined as a distinctive grammatical and lexical system which can be substantially realized in different ways, then what does spelling have to do with it? It is true that some spelling has a grammatical function (like apostrophe *s* which distinguishes the possessive form from the plural) but most of it does not. If you are going to ignore phonological variation, then, to be consistent, you should surely ignore graphological variation as well, and overlook it as a kind of written accent.

The reason it is not overlooked, I think, is that standard English, unlike other dialects, is essentially a written variety mainly designed for institutional purposes (education, administration, business and so on). Its spoken version is secondary, and typically used by those who control these institutions. This means that although it may not matter how it is spoken, it emphatically does matter how it is written. Furthermore, since writing, as a more durable medium, is used to express and establish institutional values, deviations from orthographic conventions undermine in some degree the institutions which they serve. They can be seen as evidence of social instability: a sign of things beginning to fall apart. So it is not surprising that those who have a vested interest in maintaining these institutions should be so vexed by bad spelling. It is not difficult to identify words through their unorthodox appearance. What seems to be more crucial is that good spelling represents conformity to convention and so serves to maintain institutional stability.

Similar points can be made about grammatical features. Since language has built-in redundancy, grammatical conformity is actually not particularly crucial for many kinds of communicative transaction. What we generally do in the interpretative process is actually to edit grammar out of the text, referring lexis directly to context, using lexical items as indexical clues to meaning. We edit grammar back in when we need it for fine tuning. If the reason for insisting on standard English is because it guarantees effective communication, then the emphasis should therefore logically be on lexis rather than grammar. But the champions of standard English do not see it in this way: on the contrary, they focus attention on grammatical abuse. Why should this be so? There are, I think, two reasons. Firstly, it is precisely because grammar is so often redundant in communicative transactions that it takes on another significance, namely that of expressing social identity. The mastery of a particular grammatical system, especially, perhaps, those features which are redundant, marks you as a member of the community which has developed that system for its own social purposes. Conversely, of course, those who are unable to master the system are excluded from the community. They do not belong. In short, grammar is shibboleth.

So when the custodians of standard English complain about the ungrammatical language of the populace, they are in effect indicating that the perpetrators are outsiders, non-members of the community. The only way they can become members, and so benefit from the privileges of membership, is to learn standard English, and those privileges include, of course, access to the institutions which the community controls. Standard English is an entry condition and the custodians of it the gatekeepers. You can, of course, persist in your non-standard ways if you choose, but then do not be surprised to find yourself marginalized, perpetually kept out on the periphery. What you say will be less readily attended to, assigned less importance, if it is not expressed in the grammatically approved manner. And if you express yourself in writing which is both ungrammatical and badly spelled, you are not likely to be taken seriously. You are beyond the pale. Standard English, then, is not simply a means of communication but the symbolic possession of a particular community, expressive of its identity, its conventions and values. As such it needs to be carefully preserved, for

to undermine standard English is to undermine what it stands for: the security of this community and its institutions. Thus it tends to be the communal rather than the communicative features of standard English that are most jealously protected: its grammar and spelling.

I do not wish to imply this communal function is to be deplored. Languages of every variety have this dual character: they provide the means for communication and at the same time express the sense of community, represent the stability of its conventions and values, in short, its culture. All communities possess and protect their languages. The question is, which community and which culture have a rightful claim to ownership of standard English? For standard English is no longer the preserve of a group of people living in an off-shore European island, even if some of them still seem to think that it is. It is an international language. As such, it serves a whole range of different communities and their institutional purposes, and these transcend traditional communal and cultural boundaries. I am referring to the business community, for example, and the community of researchers and scholars in science and technology and other disciplines. Standard English, especially in its written form, is their language. It provides for effective communication, but at the same time, it establishes the status and stability of the institutional conventions which define these international activities. These activities develop their own conventions of thought and procedure, customs and codes of practice; in short, they in effect create their own cultures, their own standards. And obviously for the maintenance of standards it is helpful, to say the least, to have a standard language at your disposal. But you do not need native speakers to tell you what it is. [...]

As I indicated earlier, the custodians of standard English express the fear that if there is diversity, things will fall apart and the language will divide up into mutually unintelligible varieties. But things in a sense have already fallen apart. The varieties of English used for international communication in science, finance, commerce and so on are mutually unintelligible. As far as lexis is concerned, their communicative viability depends on the development of separate standards, and this means that their communication is largely closed off from the world outside.

The point, then, is that if English is to retain its vitality and its capability for continual adjustment, it cannot be confined within a standard lexis. And this seems to be implicitly accepted as far as particular domains of use are concerned. Nobody, I think, says that the abstruse terms used by physicists or stock-brokers are non-standard English. It is generally accepted that communities or secondary cultures which are defined by shared professional concerns should be granted rights of ownership and allowed to fashion the language to their needs.

The same tolerance is not extended so readily to primary cultures and communities, where the language is used in the conduct of everyday social life. Lexical innovation here, equally motivated by communal requirement, is generally dismissed as dialect. Take, for example, the two words *depone* and *prepone*. The first is a technical legal term and therefore highly respectable. The second, *prepone*, is not. It is an Indian English word of very general currency, coined to contrast with 'to postpone'. To postpone an event means to put it back, to prepone an event is to bring it forward. The coinage exploits the morphology of English in an entirely regular way. It is apt. But it is also quaint. An odd Indian excrescence: obviously non-standard. And yet there is clearly nothing deviant in the derivational process itself and, indeed, we can see it at work in the formation of the related words *predate* and *postdate*. But these are sanctioned as entirely ordinary, proper, standard English words. What, then, is the difference? The difference lies in the origin of the word. Prepone is coined by a non-native speaking community, so it is not really a proper English word. It is not *pukka*. And of course the word *pukka* is itself only *pukka* because the British adopted it.

Where are we then? When we consider the question of standard English what we find, in effect, is double standards. The very idea of a standard implies stability and this can only be fixed in reference to the past. But language is of its nature unstable. It is essentially protean in nature, adapting its shape to suit changing circumstances. It would otherwise lose its vitality and its communicative and communal value. This is generally acknowledged in the case of specialist domains of use, but is not acknowledged in the case of everyday social uses of the language. So it is that a word like *depone* is approved and a word like *prepone* is not. But the basic principle of dynamic adaption is the same

in both cases. And in both cases, the users of the language exploit its protean potential and fashion it to their needs, thereby demonstrating a high degree of linguistic capability. In both cases the innovation indicates that the language has been learned, not just as a set of fixed conventions to conform to, but as a resource for making meaning; and making meaning which you can call your own. This, surely, is a crucial condition. You are proficient in a language to the extent that you make it your possession, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to dictates of its form. It is a familiar experience to find oneself saying things in a foreign language because you can say them rather than because they express what you want to say. You feel you are going through the motions, and somebody else's motions at that. You are speaking the language but not speaking your mind. Real proficiency is when you are able to take possession of the language and turn it to your advantage. This is what mastery means. So in a way, proficiency only comes with non-conformity, when you can take the initiative and strike out on your own. Consider these remarks of the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience ... But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

Achebe is a novelist and he is talking here about creative writing. But the point I have been making is that all uses of language are creative in the sense that they draw on linguistic resources to express different perceptions of reality. English is called upon to carry the weight of all kinds of experience, much of it very remote indeed from its ancestral home.

The new English that Achebe refers to is locally generated, and although it must necessarily be related to, and so in communion with, its ancestral origins in the past, owes no allegiance to any descendants of this ancestry in the present. And this point applies to all other new Englishes which have been created to carry the weight of different experience in different surroundings, whether they are related to specialist domains of use or to the contexts of everyday life. They are all examples of the entirely normal and necessary process of adaption, a process which obviously depends on non-conformity to existing con-

ventions or standards. For these have been established elsewhere by other people as appropriate to quite different circumstances. The fact that these people can claim direct descent from the founding fathers has nothing to do with it. How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England or anywhere else. They have no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant. The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it. To grant such custody of the language, particularly, one might add, to a nation disposed to dwell on the past, is necessarily to arrest its development and so undermine its international status. It is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.

[..]

As soon as you accept that English serves the communicative and communal needs of different communities, it follows logically that it must be diverse. An international language has to be an independent language. It does not follow logically, however, that the language will disperse into mutually unintelligible varieties. For it will naturally stabilise into a standard form to the extent required to meet the needs of the communities concerned. Thus it is clearly vital to the interests of the international community of, for example, scientists or business people, whatever their primary language, that they should preserve a common standard of English in order to keep standards of communicative effectiveness. English could not otherwise serve their purpose. It needs no native speaker to tell them that. Furthermore, this natural tendency towards standardization will be reinforced by the extending of networks of interaction through developments in telecommunications and information technology. For there is little point in opening up such amazing new transmission systems if what you transmit makes no sense at the other end. The availability of these new channels calls for the maintenance of a common code. And these are therefore likely to have greater influence on stabilizing the language than the pronouncements of native speakers.

The essential point is that a standard English, like other varieties of language, develops endo-normatively, by a continuing process of self-regulation, as appropriate to different conditions of use. It is not fixed, therefore, by native speakers. They have no special say in the matter, in spite of their claims to ownership of real English as associated with their own particular cultural contexts of use.

[...]