

Lan KE's assignment 3

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Critique arguments for teaching Standard Varieties of English

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Abstract

In the critique, we discuss the pros and cons of teaching Standard Varieties of English (henceforth SVE). The argumentation is characterised with three meta-questions: What does one mean by SVE? Why should we teach SVE? How do we teach SVE?

The first chapter addresses the definition of Standard Varieties of English. The seemingly self-evident concept requires more critical analyses and theoretical clarifications to be rendered fully generalisable. This chapter will introduce several currently existing models of world Englishes for clarifying the referent of SVE. The first chapter is also constructed on Standard English, the umbrella term of SVE. We argue for thoroughly comprehending the relationship between SE and SVE as the former is irrespective of accents which the latter must factor in. This chapter ends with well-defined SVE for chapter two to elaborate on.

The second chapter justifies teaching SVE. It firstly illustrates the merits of promoting a certain SVE as the norm in English teaching. It does so by introducing the Received Pronunciation and General American, two SVEs in the UK and the US, respectively. After the introduction, the chapter then proceeds to compare SVE-based teaching with other paradigms, such as ELF (English as a lingua franca) teaching. The comparison aims to visualise the merits, but it also touches on its downsides, such as stifling the establishment of emerging varieties and being irresponsive to the local linguistic reality.

The last chapter serves as the bone of contention, the approaches to teaching SVE. The first half argues for a descriptive approach rather than sticking coherently to its originalist doctrines. The illustration is unfolded about written and spoken forms of SVE. The former is discussed concerning grammar changes, the latter through accent changes. Such a descriptive approach, the critique asserts, is owing to the sensitive nature of SVE to changes. The critique raises the Queen's English and its divergence from modern RP as an example. Concerning its heterogeneity of functions, the critique assumes that SVE serves different primary purposes across different regions: standardisation in the inner circle, reference in the outer circle and communication in the expanding circle. Grounded on its fluid nature and functions, the subsequent half of the chapter advocates for a personalised SVE-based teaching, asserting that the specific kinds of SVE adopted as the norm should vary across regions.

I. What is SVE?

The term Standard English is subject to debate in sociolinguistics. The conventional wisdom has been that SVE refers to the norm of communication in the English-speaking regions. However, in

practice, it results in different, sometimes opposite interpretations due to the establishment of various national standards. As Crystal (2011) puts it, the meaning of the term is increasingly more challenging to grasp as more and more people speak English as the first or the second language. Hickey (2010) traces the historical roots of SE, claiming it a development of the 18th century. Smith (2003) shares a similar point of view, characterising it as the generally accepted rules, the grammars of which are established in the 18th century. He asserts there are many registers for various purposes and to the different degree of formality within Standard English. Therefore, it does not have to be formal to be standard. Another feature of SE, as he notes, is that it tends to be more stable than non-standard counterparts in terms of vocabulary and grammar. The codification of SE is what distinguishes it from the other dialects.

Trudgill and Hannah share similar points. They claim (2008) that the coining of the term is since English has become more than a national language. The British colonisation has made the language a lingua franca, an international language of trade and commerce. Despite a large number of native speakers, English is also the most widely spoken second language around the globe, hence the need for standardisation. Trudgill and Hannah argue that such standardising process includes selection, codification and stabilisation, which altogether make the Standard English different from other local dialects. They also indicate SE is a prestigious form of English in the sense that its grammar is described and recognised by the public and that its conduct is regarded as proper use of language.

One thing is exact: the formation of Standard English has historical roots. Take the UK and the US as instances. The standardisation of British English variety took place dating back to as early as the 18th century (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006). Samuel Johnson (1747) was the first person compiling a British dictionary. Meanwhile, the codification of American English Variety was undertaken by Noah Webster (1789) as an intentional contrast to its former sovereign state. It continues to diverge from the British English and forms its entire system of spelling and phonology, as Schneider describes in his dynamic model (2003).

When it comes to the grammatical peculiarities of SE, Trudgill and Hannah (2008) claim there are some subtle but essential features such as lacking negative concord, a strict semantic distinction between the past simple and past perfect and so forth. These grammars are peculiar in a sense most non-standard Englishes tend to have the opposite use, making SE the minority. However, that SE has some non-mainstream grammar rules does not make it more or less formal. As is discussed above, Standard English exist irrespective of styles, registers, and accents. One could be using SE in a highly informal setting.

This is where confusion kicks in. As Hickey (2012) notes, in English-speaking regions, there exists variation in terms of vocabulary, spelling and grammar. These differences are only "standard" to its

people, and they become errors beyond the borderlines. Though the syntactic structure of SE has been agreed upon with some adjustments in different regions, when it comes to the spoken form of SE, its divergence is not reconcilable. There is no consensus as to what its phonology should be like. The criteria of SE in phonological terms vary drastically from country to country, region to region.

In this respect, we should employ a pluralistic approach to better capture this linguistic reality. The critique herein argues for using the Standard Varieties of English (SVE), the hyponym of SE, as the norm. This is because the term factors in the phonology of a language. Unlike SE which few could explain in its entirety, SVE has specific referents. A proper analogy of the relationship between the two terms is the one between the allophone and phoneme. A phoneme is the smallest unit of human sounds that makes sense. An allophone, on the other hand, is the realisation of such a phoneme under particular phonetic environment. The same goes for Standard English and its varieties. The former is the pluralistic whole, and the latter is its realisation in a specific country. So, it is safe to claim SVE is SE constructed with a nationally recognised English phonology. In the context of British English, its Standard Variety is the Received Pronunciation (RP). In American English, it is the General American (GA). In Australian English, it is the General Australian (GA).

The critique advocates using SVE as the term in the discussion. This is because English teaching integrates not only grammar learning but pronunciation acquisitions as well. Standard or otherwise, students will be hearing and imitating authentic English. It is not feasible to discuss Standard English without specifying its phonological settings.

II. Why should we teach SVE?

After clarifying the referent of Standard Varieties of English, another question ensues: Since regions such as mainland China and Korea have no standardised local English variety for historical reasons, which SVE should we adopt in teaching? Before answering the question, it is worth referencing to existing models of World Englishes. The critique argues that by looking at the current ways SVEs function in different regions, we will have a more insightful understanding of its imposition in the places as mentioned earlier.

In the chronological order of English spreading, Jenkins (2006) summarises that there is generally three status of English: English as Native Language (ENL), English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL). Besides chronological factors, Kachru (1985) also incorporates how British colonisation shapes SVE in the different former colonies. He proposes three concentric circles of English: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. As Trudgill and Hannah (2008) suggest, there is a high degree of overlap between the referents of the two models. In most inner-circle countries, English is also the native language to most of the population. In regions of the

outer circle, English is one of the official languages and a second language to many. The same applies to the expanding circle, where English is also a foreign language.

With many SVEs emerging as the national standards, which one/ones should the EFL countries adopt? The critique intends to answer the question from a purely linguistic perspective. We propose using phoneme as the sheer criteria in measuring the efficacy of a SVE in teaching. The justification is two-fold: on the one hand, the EFL regions/expanding circle do not have a great deal of historical baggage when it comes to setting national standards. Most of these regions were not former British colonies, and English has never played a role, official or otherwise. As is discussed in the previous chapter, the codification of some SVE, such as the General American, has historical roots. It was standardised as an intentional contrast to British English. Nevertheless, the promotion of standard English varieties in the EFL regions are free from such ideological constraints. Therefore, we should measure the SVE on a more practical level: to what extent the mastery of the variety helps us to communicate better.

With communicative purposes being the core of teaching a SVE, phoneme becomes a very illustrative parameter. It is the smallest sound unit from which human can extract meanings. Therefore, the more phonemes a variety has, the more meaning distinctions it can produce. It is worth noting that not all varieties have similar numbers of phonemes. Phonemes of consonants are relatively stable across major SVEs, but the ones of vowels vary drastically from dialect to dialect. For instance, the phonemic inventory of General American is 16, General Australian 20. The Received Pronunciation, meanwhile, has a whopping of 25 phonemic contrasts, making it the most productive SVE in meaning distinction.

To further substantiate our argument, we would like to make a comparison between the RP and one native English variety, which in the case, is Hong Kong English (HKE). HKE is a native English variety functioning as an auxiliary language. It has many distinctive features different from the current mainstream SVEs such as the merger of alveolar nasal [n] and alveolar lateral approximant [l] in the onset position of a syllable, or the replacement of the voiced labiodental fricative [v] as its voiceless counterpart [f] or the labio-velar approximant [w] (Luke and Richards, 1982). Another feature is its occasional omission of consonants at the end of a syllable (Bolton and Kwok, 1990). Such a seemingly occasional deletion of consonants is specified as the deletion of alveolar stops ([t] and [d]) in consonant clusters in specific phonological contexts (Peng and Setter, 2000). Hung (2000) depicts the phonology of HKE. He points out there HKE has a noticeably smaller phonemic inventory, with 20 consonants and seven vowels, compared with RP's 24 consonants and 12 vowels.

As the critique argues, we believe the size of phonemic inventory is a direct parameter measured against the intelligibility of an SVE. The more expansive the inventory, the more understandable a

variety is. Such comparison aims to disclose the lack of phonemic contrast may cause misunderstanding in communication. It is generalisable that in HKE, there is a systemic loss of voiced consonants. An instance is the loss of voiced labiodental fricative [v] in HKE. The phonemic vacuum is replaced either with its voiceless counterpart [f] or the labio-velar approximant [w]. As a result, *Vivian* in HKE becomes *Fifian*; *Oven* becomes *Owen*. Another instance is the missing of voiced alveolar fricative [z]. The missing phoneme is collectively substituted with its voiceless counterpart [s]. Consequently, *zoo* becomes *sue* and *practise* is identical with *practice*.

When it comes to phonemic contrasts of a vowel, the situation becomes even more problematic. There is not phonemic contrast between the close front unrounded vowel [i] and its near-close counterpart [ɪ]. In RP, the *sheet* and *shit* compose a minimal pair, but in HKE they are merged altogether. If HKE is adopted as the norm, a dramatic condition would be that its learners will not even distinguish *the sun of a beach* from *the son of a bitch*. Another example is the merger of *bad* and *bed*, in HKE the near-open front rounded vowel [æ] is missing and merges with the [ɛ], the open-mid front unrounded vowel into the same phoneme. A consequence of this merger is that HKE speakers rarely distinguish *man* from *men*.

The critique cites the above examples, not to illustrate that one SVE is inferior to another. We do believe, however, when it comes to teaching, there are some pre-existing models that teachers could capitalise on. All the communicative problems caused by the lack of specific phonemes, as are in the case of HKE, could simply be solved by introducing another ENL variety as the norm. These models are valuable resources in achieving the goal of teaching comprehensible English. Furthermore, the critique argues that RP, or other ENL varieties, are a suitable reference in the regard.

We also believe the feasibility of teaching pronunciation modelled on ENL varieties is no longer a concern. The internet has made relevant materials, either as videos or in audio forms, available with a blink of an eye. Unlike teaching decades ago, where teachers should be a perfect model themselves to demonstrate the subtle difference of the sounds, the teaching today requires teachers to be more aware of material selection. For instance, in teaching the glottal stop, teachers do not even have to be able to demonstrate the sound in all phonological environments fully. The lacking could be supplemented with videos on YouTube where there are many native speakers of British English. In this sense, the teaching of an ENL variety no longer has to be done by a teacher from ENL regions.

Despite its advantages in English teaching, the critique is aware there are reservations about the use of ENL varieties. The most obvious counterargument is that EFL and ESL speakers have long outnumbered the native speakers. It is argued that as a lingua franca, English is increasingly detached from the historical and cultural background of the inner circle regions. As a result, English teaching should also follow suit by providing a more neutral variety. Trudgill and Hannah (2008) raises the

dental fricatives ([θ] and [ð]) as an example, saying that it is pedantic sticking to their correct pronunciations, as more often than not, the conversation takes place between two non-native English speakers, neither of whom knows the correct pronunciation.

Being pedantic is not the only concern. In ESL/outer circle regions, there is a more profound controversy of clinging to the ENL varieties. Some studies (Smitherman, 2003; Trudgill and Hannah, 2008) reveal the promotion of the one form of language risks alienating bilinguals by constraining their options for voice, hence a hindrance to the emergence of a new variety. They claim by using ENL varieties in English teaching, speakers of ESL varieties might have the feeling of inferiority.

These counterarguments demand critical reflections. However, as the next chapter will illustrate, the concerns above are more of a technicality than of principles. The drawbacks of promoting ENL varieties could be well addressed with a fluid and descriptive approach to teaching.

III. How do we teach SVE?

The critique argues for the introduction of ENL varieties as the norm in English teaching. Its implementation, nonetheless, should be descriptively and fluidly. To elaborate on the matter in more details, the chapter is further split up into three parts: written SVE teaching, spoken SVE teaching and the multi-speed agenda. The pedagogical ideology of fluidity and descriptiveness is throughout the entire process.

When we talk about "fluid", we believe the approach to teaching should be grounded on the fact that language is consistently changing, despite its relatively intact structure. Therefore, the way of acquiring the language should also be pluralistic. There ought not to be too many formalistic limits as to how students learn the SVE and how teachers teach it. Students and teachers should be free to make use of all their linguistic repertoire in the process as SVE teaching is outcome-oriented. Speaking of "descriptive", we assert that the role of introducing a model in teaching is not to constrain students' exploration of language use, but to inform them of the language paradigm merely. As Andrews (2006) puts it, when descriptively teaching grammar, one should focus on what a language IS like, rather than what it SHOULD be like, even though occasionally the conclusion remains the same between the two perspectives. He raises the example of *fewer* vs *less* to illustrate that irrespective of their difference in grammar books, in today's daily communication, these two words serve to express the same meanings and are increasingly interchangeable.

The fluid and descriptive approach are incredibly inspiring to teaching written SVE, especially grammar. Ashcroft et al. (2003) study how English changes as the British Empire brings it to the colonies. They claim language is not only the medium of communication but of power as well. As the former British colonies gained independence, they capitalise on their SVE as the weapon against the

British metropolitan power. English language and its change, consequently, is both a natural and intentional procedure. They claim there are two processes in the changes in English. The first is to abrogate the language by denying its prestigious role, as it once happened in the outer circle regions. The second is language appropriation to reconstruct, recapture and remould the language to new usages. A new problem emerges: the new usage is not compatible under the grammatical framework of a SVE but is widely accepted in a community. Take the double negatives in Black English as an example. In Black English, there are two grammatical negations used in a sentence of negation. The sentence “*I will not tell anyone.*” in SVE will become “*Me ain’t tell no one.*” in the Black English. So how do teachers deal with the contradiction?

This is where the descriptive approach helps. A prescriptive approach would be to simply attribute the usage of double negatives to ungrammatical usage or more bluntly put, wrong. Nevertheless, it cannot explain why double negatives are increasingly seen not just among the African Americans, but on the internet in general. The descriptive approach, on the other hand, will be to describe the double negatives as a feature prevailing in the black community and gaining popularity in oral English. Instead of labelling the double negatives as wrong or unauthentic, a descriptive approach would suggest learners refrain themselves from using this feature in writing formally because the majority in the English-speaking world do not use it this way.

It is also worth noting through the descriptive lens the standards of SVE teaching do not relax. Instead, it is a fine-grained analysis that compartmentalises grammar into different situations, each of which has its boundaries. In so doing, it accepts the space for the evolution of English legitimises nativisation of English as a beneficial attempt to make the language more inclusive towards reality.

It is not just the written form of SVE that requires a new approach to teaching. The spoken form, especially in terms of its accent part, is in even more volatile changes. An example is the glottalisation of [t] in British English. This trend happens across varieties of all social strata, even amongst RP speakers (Fabricius, 2002).

Another example is on how the Queen changes her speech throughout the years. There are researches (Harrington, 2006, 2007; Harrington et al., 2000, 2005) on the English spoken by HRH Queen Elizabeth II, the incarnation of the Queen’s English. They reveal that even the Queen herself has changed her accent. Jiang et al. (2020) conduct a diachronic study and share a similar conclusion. They notice the Queen’s English has undergone a shift towards the English of the commons, both in lexical, syntactic, and phonological terms.

Of all the changes, the most obvious one is the reduction of the mid front rounded vowel [ɛ]. As a feature of the Queen’s English, this vowel used to be consistent in words such as *can*, *ban* and *land*. The vowels of these words are pronounced in ordinary British English as [æ], a more open front

rounded counterpart. But the studies reveal that the Queen no longer uses the [ɛ] sound as frequently as she did in the 1950s. She is speaking more similarly to the ordinary British people today by pronouncing word **land** as [lænd], rather than [lend] (closer to **lend**) as she once did.

We can infer from the example above of two possible interpretations. As teachers we can either prescriptively claim the Queen is losing her Queen's English, or we can employ a more descriptive approach, explaining to students that there is a paradigm shift, not only to the Queen but to RP English generally, that somehow changes the substance of the Queen's English.

Such explanatory power is the strength of the descriptive approach in English teaching. The traditional prescriptive approach narrows down teachers' horizon by regarding a SVE as an intact point. Any deviation from the point is seen as an error. In the descriptive lens, meanwhile, the SVE is a continuum of a range of features. The substitution of one feature does not bring about the nullification of the term.

After addressing the changes in written and spoken SVE descriptively, there is one more concern. People who oppose introducing a SVE as the norm fear it might stifle the emerging new variety. The concern is especially noted in the outer circle regions where English is spoken as the second language while the teaching heavily relies on SNL varieties as the model. We should examine the premise the question before answering it: Is the new variety existent? More precisely, is the establishment of a new standard variety possible? The critique believes Schneider's Dynamic Model should be referred to in examining the question.

The model was put forward by Schneider (2007) in *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. He delineates five stages in the establishment of an English variety. The first stage is the Foundation. This is where English is newly imported to the new colony. As the colonies establish, English stabilises exonormatively. It becomes what Ferguson (1959) calls the High Variety as the colony becomes diglossic. As English becomes more frequently used by the lower class, the language comes into the third phase of Nativisation. New words are introduced en masse in response to the local realities. Afterwards, the local variety of English stabilises endonormatively as a new identity for the colony, usually in stark contrast with the English used in the metropolitan centre. Finally, the fifth phase is Differentiation, where internal variation occurs to the newly emergent SVE, producing secondary varieties such as regional accents, registers of strata.

It is true that some nativised English varieties become recognised and develop standards of their own, such as Irish English or Singaporean English. These newly recognised varieties are by and large in the outer circle where English has long played an official role and is part of their nationals' identity. When teaching an SVE, teachers should look up to their local standards instead of the varieties like the RP or GA as the norm. However, not all varieties manage to get legitimised as a Standard Variety.

There are more local English varieties that never reach the final phase, especially in the expanding circle where English is neither native nor official language to the people.

Grounded on the facts above, we propose a multi-speed agenda for teaching SVE. The idea envisages that various concentric circles of world Englishes should promote SVE at various speeds and extents. In the inner circle, SVE is spoken as a sign of high social stratum and education. It has demonstrated to the other regions the attractiveness of learning a prestigious language. In the outer circle, if the emerging native variety has met the threshold as a nationally accepted independent variety, such as Philippine English (Borlongan, 2016), it should also be permitted as the norm in English teaching. This is because these varieties are more available to learn, its phonological system resembles the phonology of the native languages, and its local vocabulary is a better reflection of its society and culture. However, we also agree that the ENL varieties where these regions used to look upon should be accepted as the co-existing norm for linguistic conservatism.

In the expanding circle/EFL regions, we argue to retain ENL varieties as the standard because codification of the local variety never occurs. We also advocate for more fluid and flexible methods to implement teaching the SVEs. Unlike Englishes in the inner and outer circles that function to shape the imagined community, acquiring English in the EFL regions is for a pure communicative purpose. This sheer pragmatic orientation allows teachers to be less constrained by formalism and nationalism when developing teaching materials. Take *English* of People's Education Press as an example. The textbook is enshrined as part of the national curriculum for Chinese students. Received Pronunciation speakers read its audiobook, but the spelling and the grammar are modelled on General American, e.g., *gotten* being the past perfect of *get*. Such flexibility, the critique argues, helps learners get more exposed to the real linguistic environment. And English teaching is responsible for reflecting this fact because we do not decide the English others use to our liking in real communication.

It is worth noting that even if SVEs are introduced and promoted as the norm, creative use of English is still possible. To learn a Standard Variety of English requires us to regard the existent grammar seriously. Nevertheless, on the lexical level, there is space for the introduction of new words to reflect the local reality. There are always fields it does not reach to cover. And this is where language modification takes place. By coining new words and appropriating existing words, we could push forward the linguistic boundary under the SVE framework.

Conclusion

In the first chapter, the critique clarifies the definition of SVE, claiming it is a realisation of SE in a certain national setting. It is the Standard English constructed with a nationally recognised phonology.

We then proceed to contemplate on the merits and downsides of promoting SVE. We believe that despite the potential discouragement to the creative use of language, the merits of teaching SVE outweighs its problems. Introducing SVE in teaching helps to standardise the learning model. It is relatively stable compared with the local variety that is in volatile change. Furthermore, the relevant studies on SVEs are abundant, making its teaching materials accessible.

In the last chapter, the critique addresses the concerns of teaching SVEs, proposing a descriptive approach to teaching SVE. Instead of imposing it like an ultimatum onto its learners, teachers could treat SVE as the description of language used by the educated. The critique in the end advocates for a multi-speed agenda where different concentric circles might promote SVEs at a different pace and to different extents. It states that creative use of language will not be stifled so long as it is rhetorically and contextually motivated. Language is destined to be pluralised and enriched as it settles in a new place. Using the pre-existing model for reference does not hinder the process.

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