

Hedging the Standard English Bet

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With all the attention paid in recent years to non-standard dialects of English, the white middle class has passively acquired a reputation as standard speakers. But it is clear to any English teacher that most middle class students speak English with at least some non-standard forms: Schools abound with multiple negatives, object pronouns in subject position, and non-standard past participles. Those students who come to school using few or no non-standard forms are a welcome sight to the teacher, and are rewarded academically for their language skills. But these skills may be illusory, for the definition of standard English is a negative one, and what are perceived as standard language skills may actually be "negative skills."

It is generally acknowledged that there is no clear definition of American standard pronunciation: Any pronunciation qualifies as "standard American" that contains no *noticeable* regional or ethnic features. So an easterner and a midwesterner who rid their speech of stereotyped regional pronunciation features will both qualify as standard speakers although their speech will be far from identical. The same is true on the grammatical level. While standard English grammar *can* perhaps be described in positive terms, the notion is usually applied negatively: Any speech that shows no stigmatized non-standard grammatical forms is identified as "standard English." And while speakers are rewarded for not using non-standard forms, it generally goes unnoticed if they fail to use certain kinds of standard constructions. Rarely is it noticed if a speaker uses a wide range of standard grammatical options: it is not a common compliment, for instance, to say, "person x uses pronouns beautifully," or "what a variety of standard negative constructions person y uses." On the contrary, such a comment would more likely be an observation that the speaker is making a pretentious display of standard usage. Good English is simply English with no grammatical errors.

The difficulty with our negative definition of standard grammar is that a speaker who uses no stigmatized forms does not necessarily control the full complement of standard forms, and may in fact have little more knowledge of standard English than the speaker who uses non-standard forms regularly. Such a standard speaker may, in fact, simply know how to avoid "difficult" constructions, and the main difference between the two groups of speakers may be in their attitudes toward using non-standard forms "in public." The avoidance of non-standard constructions is considered a useful linguistic skill, since avoiders are heard as the better speakers. But in fact they are restricting their style, by using only a portion of their syntactic competence. For while the non-standard speakers may produce more stigmatized forms, they are using a wider range of construc-

tions and thus have more stylistic flexibility than the avoiders.

Such avoidance is a common linguistic strategy, part of a general hypercorrect tendency that is particularly characteristic of lower middle class speakers. Linguistic features (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) are socially stratified, and forms associated with the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy are traditionally considered "incorrect." Speakers are of course aware of the correlation between socioeconomic class and linguistic forms, and monitor their own speech as a function of their ambitions and their feelings about their status. Virtually all people use fewer stigmatized forms in their formal, carefully monitored speech than in their everyday casual speech. But since different groups of people have differing feelings about their social status, they do not all "correct" their speech to the same extent. The upwardly mobile lower middle class in this country has far more self-conscious speakers than the other classes, and this self-consciousness is reflected in both their patterns of correction in careful speech and in their overt reactions to the speech of others. Lower middle class speakers correct their pronunciation in formal speech far more than any other socio-economic group, and they judge the speech of others using stigmatized forms more harshly (Labov, *The Social*). This hypersensitivity to linguistic "correctness" is generally referred to as *linguistic insecurity*, and is a response of upwardly mobile people to the perception that their speech borders between standard and non-standard. This insecurity frequently results in hypercorrect errors, which amount to a misinterpretation of standard rules (as in, for instance, *between you and I*, and *whom shall I say is calling?*). Far less noticeable, but more insidious from an English teacher's point of view, is the simple avoidance of troublesome constructions.

As examination of high school students' speech in several Detroit suburbs shows, just such patterns of avoidance in the use of negative constructions (Huyser, *et. al.*). The speakers who use non-standard, multiple, negatives freely produce a full range of negative sentences. But a number of these speakers who use few or no non-standard negatives apparently do so by avoiding certain constructions. Negative sentences beginning with indefinites (no, nothing, etc.) appear to be particularly problematic for these speakers. An examination of false starts makes it clear that the absence of such sentences from their speech is a result of an effort. On the occasions when they actually begin sentences with negative indefinites, they stop before they arrive at the verb (where they will have to decide whether or not to add a negative participle) and begin the sentence all over, using a simpler grammatical option:

“Well, nothing – you think everything you say comes out real funny and usually it does.”

“No one really – you know, they won’t make you do it.”

While the alternatives chosen in the above examples are simpler for the speaker who is insecure about negative constructions, they are far less attractive stylistically. These speakers’ linguistic insecurity is forcing them into an awkward style: “Correctness” wins over grace.

Attention to standard language may have a stifling effect on the spoken and written performance of all but the true native speakers of standard English. The upwardly mobile, particularly the college-bound, students, in their concern for producing “acceptable” speech and writing, are forced into patterns of expression that can only be described as impoverished. Their attention to “negative” linguistic skills may very well prevent them from developing a fluid and varied style. Unabashed nonstandard speakers, on the other hand, are probably being penalized for their use of non-standard forms, and not rewarded for the very fluidity and richness of style that they achieve through the use of their natural patterns.

All of this is not to say that standard English should not be taught or even emphasized in school. But it should be remembered that most people are natively non-standard speakers, and can achieve standard usage through either a

positive or a negative effort. It has been emphasized in recent years that radically different non-standard varieties of English, such as the Black English Vernacular, are indeed separate systems and cannot be profitably treated as a series of errors. Such treatment will only result in alienation and/or the kind of hypercorrect behavior discussed here. It may be useful to consider the range of English varieties available in our society as a continuum ranging from the most non-standard speech to written standard norms. No speaker learns the written norms natively; they must be earned as an auxiliary system to one’s native speech. For speakers at increasing distances from this end of the continuum, the acquisition of standard writing skills will involve increasing difficulty as it involves learning more and more standard rules. The problems of those closer to the standard end should not be ignored, nor should the close relation between their problems and those of very non-standard speakers. For many speakers, standard rules will always be auxiliary, never “natural,” and care must be taken that in giving attention to these rules one does not lose sight of stylistic ease as a separate goal.

Whether one believes in the increasing use of non-standard varieties, or in the emphasis on standard language, all will agree that style is an important skill. And style will be difficult to develop if it is confused with mastery of standard grammar, for however the two sets of skills may interact, they are not mutually dependent.