The Knotted Ball of Twine: Unraveling Standard English, American English, and Coded Language

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Unraveling Standard English, American English, and Coded Language
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How do we define Standard English? Spoken English is culturally relevant and exists within a societal context, while written English exists in a more formally defined context. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines standard English from 1836 as “the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood” (2008). This modern, descriptive characterization of Standard English provides usage as a key norm to gauge both informal and formal applications. Describing language as it is spoken and written stands in stark contrast to older, prescriptive methods of judging “correct and incorrect” language use. Cultural and societal norms and values are also instrumental in examining how English is used and what ends the words serve. When taken in its cultural context, we see that some words used within the constructs of Standard English possess multiple meanings and somewhat subversive connotations. How, then, do we approach a linguistic and rhetorical examination of English?

English Becomes Standardized

Although the English language has possessed countless of dialects over several hundred years, linguists can discern its standardization based on the publication of dictionaries. Appearing first in 1604, Robert Cawdry’s *Table Alphabeticall of Hard Words* is the first known list of Standard English words. It was not until the 18th century, however, with Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* and Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* that commonly-used words were represented complete with “position of accent and the division of words into syllables” (Clark, p. 75). Additionally, Johnson’s dictionary included quotes to illustrate each word, and assessments on the prescriptive use of words. Because the British Empire colonized and assimilated many other cultures, British English became Standard English. Beginning in the 20th century, we find changes in dictionaries of Standard English such as the *Third New International Dictionary* in 1959 that provided descriptive assessments of English and averted from making judgments on whether or not a word was “substandard” in usage (Clark, p. 75).

During the early part of this lexicographical shift, American lexicographers and linguists developed a uniquely American standardization, known today as Standard American English (SAE). Beginning in 1828 with Noah Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, an official documentation of written English language provided new spellings and pronunciations that were different from Standard British English. Mary Clark provides examples of some of these differences as consonant drops (honour to honor) and grapheme reversal (centre to center) (p.76). Webster sought to clarify spellings through these changes and also included new pronunciations of British words as he called on Americans to: “Let us then seize the present moment and establish a national language as well as a national government” (Barnard, 1986). While not as well known as other revolutionary speeches, these words echo early Colonial sentiment for an American lexicographical identity. These changes, however, did not occur in a vacuum. Political, social, and intellectual influences impacted a fledgling Standard American English language as detailed in Table 1.
Table 1: Early Influences on Standard American English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influences</th>
<th>Pre-1776</th>
<th>1776-1900</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Oligarchy</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aristocratic power transfer</td>
<td>Elected government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divine right</td>
<td>Governed rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Class division</td>
<td>Re-distribution of wealth to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The wealthy controlled power</td>
<td>common people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and educational opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Classical Thought</td>
<td>Enlightenment Thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Euclid</td>
<td>Rousseau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socrates</td>
<td>Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>Voltaire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>Hume</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced in Table 1, the post-revolutionary time period is a lengthier and greater influence on 21st century Standard American English (SAE). Noah Webster did not have the final word, though. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) recently aired a series on speaking American. Dr. Natalie Baker-Shirer, Carnegie Mellon Professor and project consultant explained Standard American English as accent reduction: “Standard speech is spoken nowhere in America, as such. It is based on RD (British Received Pronunciation) which was adopted with American alterations in the early 20th century by linguist William Tilly. These alterations, this authentic ‘American’ sound, was loosely based on the speech of North Eastern populations of the U.S. It was spoken by the cultured, well-educated, well-traveled people of the time. Listen to old movies to hear it” (Do You Speak American?). It would seem that the modern notion of SAE finds traditional connections to terms liked cultured, well-traveled, and educated. Taken as part of a viable definition, these terms might exclude millions of SAE speakers. Editors of The American Heritage Dictionary, who were also part of the PBS project, explain that: “Standard American English is highly elastic and variable, since what counts as SAE will depend both on the locality and the particular varieties that SAE is being contrasted with.”

For the purposes of this study, I will consider SAE to be a variant of English spoken, encripted, and employed by the ruling or governing class of our country. I make this classification based on linguistic parameters set forth by linguists Philip Riley and Karen Risager. In his book *Language, Culture, and Identity: An Ethnolinguistics Perspective*, Riley asserts that ethnolinguistics “has variously been approached as the study of a group’s experience of life as it is organized and expressed through the group’s language tools and as a science whose aim is to examine the relationships between a language on the one hand and society and culture on the other” (2007). Risager expounds on the cultural imperatives of language: “Language
users are actors in relation to the development of language, and certain groups of actors have more influence than others. Linguistic norms are historically variable and contingent” (2006). With the theories of two ethnolinguists and my own American thoughts on culture and language connections, I look to current trends in political discourse in an examination of coded SAE.

The New Politics of Standard American English

Political interests have influenced Standard American English (SAE) throughout our country’s history. Given our democratic form of government, however, the stakes become high for speakers and writers of SAE and their constituents who may be negatively impacted or unfairly advantaged through subversion of SAE. Subversion occurs through use of coded language, that is, language that is understood by one demographic group differently than another group and is used derogatively towards that group. When these coded words become woven into political discourse, the consequences can be and have been historically grave for minority groups. To understand coded SAE in a modern context, I would argue that the current presidential campaign has provided several examples that have surfaced against the interests of Senator Barack Obama, currently running on the Democratic ticket. Senator Obama comes from a bi-racial life experience and identifies himself as African-American. Coded SAE used by white candidates and their surrogates includes references to life experiences that impact regional dialectal groups, ethnic dialectal groups, and class dialectal groups. Whether due to mass media coverage or immediacy of electronic rhetoric, the fact remains that the language used by political leaders resonates in the memories of the American Public. This gives coded language particular efficacy in academic scholarship that examines SAE’s rhetorical influences and history.

Coded language can be used in many spheres but has received national attention recently in the 2008 political campaign cycle. Political strategists refer to use of coded language as “Dog Whistle Politics” or “Wedge Politics.” These terms literally mean strategies that appeal to only a select group of voters and usually involve white politicians speaking specifically to white Americans.

An example of how these strategies impact dialectal groups can be seen in the reaction of a Southern politician to the candidacy of an African-American. In September 2008, Georgia Congressman Lynn Westmoreland referred to Senator and Mrs. Barack Obama as” members of an elitist class individual that thinks they’re uppity.” When given the opportunity to clarify, Westmoreland repeated, “yeah, uppity” (Weisman). When defined by The Merriman-Webster Dictionary, “uppity” means, “putting on or marked by airs of superiority” (2008). When taken in Southern American dialectal code, however, this word refers also to an African-American who has overstepped his societal bounds. CNN commentator David Gergen expounded on the dialectal connection: “I can tell you that’s code for, ‘He’s uppity, he ought to stay in his place.’ Everybody gets that who is from a Southern background” (Stein, 2008). Gergen, who has worked for both Republican and Democratic administrations, builds on this coded language in further campaign subtext: "There has been a very intentional effort to paint him as somebody outside the mainstream, other, 'he's not one of us'” (Stein, 2008). This study argues that the dialectally specific meanings embedded in these words and phrases continue a dichotomy of White-American political power and its hold over language. This assertion is supported historically by the “Southern Strategy” employed by Republican campaigns beginning in 1964. Designed by Republican analyst Kevin Phillips, this strategy calls for “winning the white
Southern vote into the Republican sphere by attacking the Black [Civil Rights] movement as criminal, and Black political struggles as urban crime and disorder’’ (Boyd, 1970). The predicted implications of this strategy are clear: voters are to believe that African-Americans are the cause of crime and chaos in Southern cities, so White voters should vote Republican, the party that will stop this crime. As a cornerstone of this political strategy, coded SAE language seeks to alienate and divide Southerners from a united region into two separate spheres. This code transitions into a division between classes in the South and throughout the U.S. as well.

Standard American English (SAE) possesses codes that impact specific class dialectal groups. In the 2008 campaign cycle, two examples surface. The first example comes from former Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. In a heated, May race for the party nomination, Clinton referred to Senator Obama as “out of step with the rest of us, hardworking white Americans” (Garofoli, 2008). Within class dialectal groups, this comment places African-American workers outside the realm of other working class Americans, who happen to be white. This code serves to further divide working class Americans and create discord within members of this class. Another example of class warfare in SAE coded political language is the McCain campaign’s continued portrayal of Senator Obama as a socialist. To unearth the code behind naming a socialist, I looked to American history and to J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI from 1924-1972.

During his tenure, Hoover used the term “socialist” liberally to describe Civil Rights leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “McCain and [Sarah] Palin have reached back into history to use an old code word for black. It sets whites apart from those deemed un-American, those who could not be trusted during the communism scare” (Diuguid, 2008). I would assert that the references to Senator Obama as a “socialist,” which now number in the thousands and run rampant on Internet blogs and websites, are historically connected to a culture of fear that was propagated during the early and middle part of the 20th century in the U.S. This culture of fear was created and maintained by the ruling, governing class, which was and is primarily composed of White Americans. When faced with the prospect of unwanted change, some members of the governing class use speciously coded language to rally their supporters against this change. Those who control the language, control the power; those in power use this control to their own ends. The fear of power loss in white establishment politics brings me to the connection between coded SAE language and its authority over perceptions of African-American ethnic groups.

An Ethnic dialectal connection further impacts the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) demographic group within coded political language. Among several examples of coded language bantered about during the 2008 Presidential campaign cycle, two stand as most significant to understand how this language works. Senator Joe Biden, who competed against Senator Barack Obama for his party’s Presidential nomination and is now the Vice-Presidential nominee and running mate of Senator Obama, provides this study with a clear example of coded language that impacts African-Americans. During an interview in early 2007, Biden referred to Obama as “the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy” (Thai). These words were so incendiary, that Biden called Obama to apologize. Senator Obama’s response: “I didn’t take Senator Biden’s comments personally, but obviously they were historically inaccurate. African-American presidential candidates like Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisolm, Carol Mosely Braun, and Al Sharpton gave a voice to many important issues through their campaigns, and no one would call them inarticulate” (Thai, 2007).
With this response, Obama conceded the meanings inherent in the coded words “articulate and clean,” the latter of which to my knowledge has never been used before to refer to a national political candidate. The code word “clean” is base in its assumption that African-Americans are not typically clean, or at least as clean as White-Americans. I believe that the political rhetoric delivered in speeches, interviews, and talking points during our most recent campaign cycle belie the populist idea of civil equality. In fact, with coded language so prevalent in mass media monologue, cultural insults hurled at ethnic groups have become part of the electronic blog-sphere. Given the intense public scrutiny of the coded comments, words, and phrases described here, there exists a strong, pervasive and symbolic significance that these SAE words possess in their connections to regional, social class, and AAVE ethnic dialectal groups.

Observations and Reflections

The development, evolution, and sometimes de-evolution of Standard American English (SAE) over the last two centuries provides a prospectus of how a language relates to diverse dialectal groups within political and cultural constructs. Elements of SAE such as coded language reflect a continuum of cultural bias against particular demographic groups who represent a significant population in the United States. Code-embedded language will most certainly continue to exist within SAE and will continue to be impacted and highlighted by political and cultural mediums.
References


