

# *Changing Standards? Children's awareness and knowledge of features of written standard English at ages 10-11*

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**CHANGING STANDARDS? CHILDREN'S AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF  
FEATURES OF WRITTEN STANDARD ENGLISH AT AGES 10-11**

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**[5,144 words, including figure 1]**

## CHANGING STANDARDS? CHILDREN'S AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF FEATURES OF WRITTEN STANDARD ENGLISH AT AGES 10-11

### *Context*

The requirement to make children aware of the features of standard English has been a statutory for schools in England since the introduction of a National Curriculum (NC) in 1988-89. The revised NC introduced in September 2000 states that at Key Stage (KS) 1: 'Pupils should be taught some of the grammatical features of written standard English' and at KS2: 'Pupils should be taught: a) how written standard English varies in degrees of formality; b) some of the differences between standard and non-standard English usage, including subject-verb agreements and the use of prepositions'. In the programmes of study for speaking and listening at KS1 and KS2 there is also a requirement to teach about spoken standard English and about language variation, including between standard and dialect forms. A note on teaching standard English lists 'the most common non-standard usages in England', though it is not clear on what basis the list was compiled:

- Subject-verb agreement (*they was*)
- Formation of past tense (*have fell, I done*)
- Formation of negatives (*ain't*)
- Formation of adverbs (*come quick*)
- Use of demonstrative pronouns (*them books*)

(DfEE/QCA, 1999, p.49, p.51 and p57.).

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) *Framework for Teaching*, introduced into most English primary schools in 1998-99, offers 'detailed objectives for planning and teaching the sections of the English programmes of study for reading and writing' (DfEE/QCA, 1999, p.23). The *Framework* defines standard English in the most recent version of its Glossary as:

... the variety of English used in public communication, particularly in writing. It is the form taught in schools and used by educated speakers. It is not limited to a particular region and can be spoken in any accent.

There are differences in vocabulary and grammar between standard English and other varieties. For example, *we were robbed* and *look at those trees* are standard English; *we was robbed* and *look at them trees* are non-standard.

To communicate effectively in a range of situations – written and oral – it is necessary to be able to use standard English, and to recognise when it is appropriate to use it in preference to any other variety.

Note that standard British is not the only standard variety; other English-speaking countries, such as the United States and Australia, have their own standard forms.

([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/glossary](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/glossary))

Objectives relating to the teaching of features of written standard English are included in the *Framework* at 'sentence level' from Year 2 through to Year 6. The NLS guidance has been extended by the publication of *Grammar for Writing* (DfEE, 2000), which includes a small number of specific teaching activities to meet the objectives relating to understanding the conventions of written standard English at KS2 (e.g. pp.102-3).

The NLS Glossary defines the related terms ‘accent’ and ‘dialect’ in the following ways:

**Accent:** features of pronunciation which vary according to the speaker's regional and social origin. All oral language, including standard English, is spoken with an accent. The term **accent** refers to pronunciation only.

**Dialect:** a dialect is a variety of a language used in a particular area and which is distinguished by certain features of grammar or vocabulary. Examples of such features in some English dialects are: non-standard subject + verb patterns, eg *I knows, you was, he like*; past tense forms, eg *I done, I seen*; various individual words and expressions, eg *owt/nowt* for *anything/nothing*.

([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/glossary](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/glossary))

These definitions of accent, dialect and standard English given in the NLS Glossary are the ones most readily available to teachers and are therefore the ones used in the research project described below.

The place of standard English, both written and spoken, in the NC, and how it should be defined there, has given rise to considerable academic and political debate over the past fifteen years. Attention was focused on the area when the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project (1989-1992), which was intended to promote good practice in the area of language variation (see Carter, 1990), was prevented from disseminating its materials to schools. Some of the locally developed classroom materials were later published commercially, however (see Harris and Wilkinson, 1990; Bain et al, 1992; Haynes, 1992; Sealey, 1996; Bunting, 1997). Deborah Cameron in *Verbal Hygiene* (1995) has reviewed in detail the complex political situation behind the introduction of standard English into the NC. John Honey in *Language is Power: the story of standard English and its enemies* (1997) stirred up further popular debate by his attack on the academic community and its attitude to standard English in the school curriculum. Later academic response to his attacks and to the debate about the position of standard English in the curriculum has appeared in *Standard English: the widening debate*, edited by Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts (1999) and in a new edition (1999) of a central text in this area *Authority in Language: investigating standard English* by James and Lesley Milroy. Tony Crowley has also reviewed what he considers the continuing confusions of linguistic, cultural and educational debate in the 1980s and 90s on the ‘standard English question’ in the second edition of his *Standard English and the Politics of Language* (2003). Most recently, David Crystal has sought to rewrite the history of English in terms of non-standard as well as the standard form in *The Stories of English* (2005).

Empirical research in the area of children’s use of standard English in British schools is relatively sparse. However, in 1995, a Schools’ Curriculum and Assessment Authority discussion paper by Richard Hudson and Jasper Holmes used existing data to look at *Children’s Use of Spoken Standard English*. This research found that significantly more girls than boys used spoken standard English, though with the proviso that the sample used in the research might not have been representative (p.9). Hudson and Holmes also found provisional evidence of a lack of developmental progression in the use of spoken standard English between younger and older children, ages 11 and 15, in their sample; they commented: ‘Our evidence may indicate that mere exposure is not sufficient, and that some kind of direct teaching or encouragement is needed. This is an issue which deserves attention.’ (p.11). My research gives further attention to this issue of

teaching about standard English and language variation, but within the context of written language and the introduction of the NLS.

### ***Research Questions***

The project reported on here tried to answer the following specific research questions:

- Which features of written English are 10-11 year olds able to recognise as non-standard?
- Are they able to suggest standard English alternatives for these non-standard features?
- What do they know about the technical terms *accent, dialect, standard English*?
- Are there significant variations between boys' and girls' awareness and knowledge?
- Are there significant variations over time?
- What impact has the NLS had on levels of awareness and knowledge of written standard English?

### ***Research Method***

The research involved pupils from two primary schools in the south of England. A sample of 100 pupils aged 10-11 was surveyed by written questionnaire in the summer term of 1999, in the first year of the introduction of the NLS, and another 100 pupils in the summer terms of 2002 and 2005. The number of boys and girls was exactly the same in all three of the surveys and exactly the same questionnaire was used as the research instrument to provide mostly quantitative but also some qualitative data (Figure 1).

The questionnaire was based on a list of non-standard English forms used in young people's speech included as an appendix to Hudson and Holmes' study (1995, pp.18-21), with additions of my own based on 'the most common non-standard usages in England' listed in the NC, as mentioned above. The questionnaire was in two parts. Part 1 presented pupils with a series of sentences each containing one or more non-standard features. They were asked to:

- Identify any non-standard features
- Substitute standard features
- Indicate if they thought the sentence did not need changing

The intention of this section of the questionnaire was to assess children's implicit awareness of standard and non-standard forms in use in written English. In some of the sentences, two or more alternative standard forms were possible as substitutions, for example *haven't* or *don't have* as well as *have not* for *ain't* in sentence 2. All possible standard English variants were accepted, including those using contractions.

The second part of the questionnaire asked the children to explain the meanings of the terms 'accent', 'dialect' and 'standard English'. The intention here was to assess children's explicit knowledge of technical terminology mentioned in the NC and NLS.

*[Figure 1]*

The questionnaires were administered by the children's teachers in normal classroom conditions following my instructions. Children of all abilities were included, except for those whose special needs meant they were unable to complete the questionnaire unaided. Teachers were asked to read the instructions on the questionnaires aloud at the beginning and check that the children knew what they had to do. Teachers could answer further queries about the instructions at any time. The

questionnaires were then completed individually and it was made clear that no help was allowed from adults or other children.

## ***Findings***

### (i) Implicit awareness

The surveys of 300 10-11 year olds in total, over six years, yielded some interesting quantitative data about children's implicit awareness of standard English. Non-standard forms which the majority of the sample children identified included:

- *Ain't* [have not]: recognised by 89% on average over the three surveys, with 80% able to supply the SE form
- *Proper* [properly]: recognised by 82%, with 70% giving the SE form
- *Is* [are]: recognised by 78%, with 72% providing the SE form
- *Hissself* [himself]: recognised by 76%, with 64% supplying the SE form
- *Wasn't* [were not]: recognised by 73%, with 62% giving the SE form
- *gotten* [got]: recognised by 70%, with 64% providing the SE form

It was interesting to see that non-standard forms often cited as ones which children use in speech and writing, such as *ain't* and the adverbial use of *proper*, were identified as such by a high proportion of the sample. The subject-verb agreement involved in the use of *is* and *wasn't*, mentioned in the NC and NLS as a particular feature of non-standard English, was also identified by around three-quarters of the children. More surprising was the fact that although the majority of the children identified *gotten* as NSE, a substantial minority of 30% accepted the American verb form as standard British English, a figure which hardly changed over the six years. Not all children who identified the NSE feature also supplied the SE form, but the percentages that did were still relatively high and some non-response may have been caused by the questionnaire design.

Double negatives in the sentences [*nothing, none, nobody*] were identified as NSE by just over 50% of the sample overall, though girls were significantly ahead of boys in their recognition of these.

On the other hand, the majority of the sample accepted the following NSE forms as standard in all three surveys:

- *could of* [could have]: 92% of the sample accepted this feature as standard. This figure was virtually the same in 1999, 2002 and 2005
- *me and my dad* [my dad/father and I]: was accepted as SE by 86%
- *five pound* [pounds]: 80% accepted this as SE
- *off of* [off]: 78% accepted this as SE
- *done* [did]: 57% accepted as SE
- *beautifulst of the two*: 53% accepted this form as SE. No children in any of the surveys supplied the SE comparative 'more beautiful' though 26% opted for 'most beautiful' and others preferred synonyms such as 'prettiest'.

My surveys of 10-11 year olds' awareness of written standard English replicated one of Holmes and Hudson's findings about spoken language, namely that there were significant differences between girls' and boys' awareness of some standard features, with girls, predictably, showing higher levels of awareness of 16 out of the 19 features included, averaged over all three surveys. Looked at over time, however, there was a clear closing of this gender gap over the years of the surveys. In 1999, girls were ahead on recognition of 16 of the 19 features, in 2002, however, girls were still ahead on only 10, and in 2005 in 12. However, looked at more closely, the narrowing of this gap was not the

result of boys doing better, but of girls' performance declining. For example, over the six years of the surveys, girls' overall performance declined by 7.1%, averaged over all 19 NSE features, whereas boys' stayed almost the same, going down by an average of only 0.2%. Whilst girls showed increased awareness in only 6 features and decreased awareness in 13, boys demonstrated increases in 9 features and decreases in 10.

This overall decline in the children's awareness of standard English features over the six years was one of the most striking findings of the surveys. A comparison between the 1999 and 2005 figures for all 19 of the features present in the research instrument reveals an increased recognition of 8 of the features but a decrease in 11. Some of the decreases are quite dramatic, for example 26% for recognition of *off of* as NSE, so across all 19 features there was an average decrease of 4.3%.

(ii) Explicit knowledge

The survey investigated explicit knowledge about the terminology of language variation as well as implicit awareness. The quantitative data revealed that just over 50% of the sample knew what 'accent' was and were able to define it in terms such as: 'the way you speak' or more specifically: 'the way a person talks from where they grew up'. Qualitative data from the incorrect replies given revealed some confusion, for example with words such as *accident* ('it wasn't deliberate'), *account* ('if you work in a shop you might be an accent manager'), *ancient* ('Olde English') and *a cent* ('American money'). There was a common confusion with *ascent*; for example, one child used his existing language knowledge logically to argue that since 'decent' was down then 'accent' meant 'climbing or going up something'. There was a tendency also to equate accent with foreign accents and with 'someone who speaks funny' or has 'a funny voice'.

Only a very small number of children (2-3% in all three surveys) had any satisfactory idea what the term 'dialect' meant. These children offered explanation such as: 'when you don't use standard English' or 'when people speak a language their own way with some different words'. Others who offered some kind of definition described dialect as: 'how you pronounce things if you're from up North' and 'the way someone speaks, like *ain't*, and the improper way to speak'. The majority simply did not know what a dialect was and could not explain or exemplify the term. Amongst those who had a guess, as invited, there were confusions with *decibel* ('level of sound'), *derelict* ('abandoned'), *dialling*, *dialogue*, *direct* ('straight at the point'), *delicate* ('kind of breakable') and even *diarrhoea*. A few children equated dialect with 'not talking proper English', 'not very good English grammar' and even having 'something wrong with your speech'.

About 40% of the children overall were able to offer some kind of partial definition of the term 'standard English', though again only 2-3% in all three surveys were able to come up with a satisfactory description, such as 'English that the whole country can understand', 'the standard language of this country' or 'the type of English we should write in'. 27% of children gave explanations using the words 'proper English' or 'speaking properly'. Other words used in explanations of standard English were, in order of popularity: good English, old-fashioned or traditional English, not using slang, formal English, normal, basic or usual English, Queen's English, correct English, posh English, nice English and average English. Most children also identified the term with spoken rather than with written English. A common misunderstanding also was to equate 'standard English' with standards in English, so that the term was taken to refer to 'how good you are at English' or being 'up to standard'. However, one child argued: 'if you get an average score in a test, you would be classified as standard English' and another thought standard English meant 'you're doing medium, not really hard English'. A more radical misunderstanding,



but an interesting insight into enterprise culture, was revealed by this reply from an 11-year-old boy: 'Standard English is a company that supplies books and English things for children'.

### **Conclusions**

The limitations of this project are clear and need to be acknowledged: for example, only two schools in one area of England were sampled; the research instrument used was clearly limited in scope and could not be developed further without losing continuity; there were no checks on the competence of the teachers involved in administering the survey or how far the pupils' responses were unaided. However, these factors were constant throughout, so should have affected the findings in a consistent way over time. The strength of the research is that it used the same research instrument to track the knowledge and awareness of the same language features amongst the same proportions of children in the same schools over a six-year period. This was a period which has been unique in English primary education in that it saw the implementation of the most detailed, prescriptive and wide-ranging literacy curriculum ever introduced, including detailed objectives for teaching about standard English. However, generalisations arising from the research obviously need to be treated with caution.

Keeping these limitations in mind, the findings of this small-scale research project lead to a number of conclusions. Firstly, awareness of commonly cited non-standard features of children's speech and writing, for example *ain't* and *proper*, was higher than might have been anticipated amongst these 10-11 year olds. This suggests that if children use these features widely it is from choice, in order to achieve a deliberate effect, rather than from ignorance of SE usage in the case of the majority.

The consistent failure to identify *of* [have] as NSE in writing by over 90% of the sample was surprising, particularly since a large percentage of children with otherwise high levels of awareness of SE failed to recognise it. This is a feature that can be difficult to detect in spoken language. Its use in writing seems to be the result of an urge to represent speech sounds, which overpowers even well developed awareness of grammatical patterns in writing. This use of a preposition instead of the contracted form of an auxiliary verb continues into the writing of many adults, as most university teachers will testify. Some US editors now apparently accept *of* used in this way as an alternative to *have* (Forster, 2004, p.20).

There were other possible areas of language change revealed by the data, such as the continuing acceptance of American *gotten* by almost a third of the 10-11 year olds, as mentioned, and the acceptance by the majority of the sample children of non-standard usages such as *me and my*, *off of*, *beautifullest* and *pound* (this plural form was 'formerly' SE, according to the 2003 edition of *Chambers Dictionary*). Holmes and Hudson, in their discussion paper, comment on the usage *me and him*, which they code as NSE: 'This may in fact be part of casual Spoken Standard English among the younger generation' (1995, p.19). As far as written usage goes, there are signs of editorial acceptance of this NSE feature also: for example a recent collection of recipes by the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has this opening sentence: 'Me and this dish go back a long way.' (Oliver, 2005, p.2).

There was little evidence of a significant impact of the NLS, introduced in 1998-99, on implicit levels of awareness of SE. Six years after the first sample, there was a clear overall decrease in levels of awareness. The 10-11 year old children sampled in Year 6 in 2005 would have been in Reception or Year 1 at the time of the first survey in 1999 and had therefore been exposed to the NLS objectives for the whole of their primary education. The 1999 survey sample, by contrast, had

only one year's exposure to the NLS, at most, and the 2002 cohort had had a maximum of four years' exposure.

The findings as regards explicit knowledge of concepts and their technical terms also provide no evidence of achievement of NLS teaching objectives. After six years of the NLS, with its emphasis on explicit teaching of grammatical terminology, there was no discernable improvement in children's ability to explain or exemplify terms such as 'accent', 'dialect' and 'standard English', and there was still considerable confusion about the latter two terms. The NLS objectives for Y5 and Y6, which make clear references to this area of learning, as well as the NC requirements introduced in 1988-89 and revised in 2000, appear to have made little difference.

Both schools used in the project were classified as in line with the national average in English according to inspection evidence and national tests in 1999 and 2000, at the beginning of the surveys. Since then, on the basis of SATs scores in English only, one school has remained at the level it was, whilst the other school has increased its results to exceed the national average in 2004. However, this increase in SATs scores for English in the two schools overall is not reflected in my surveys. This repeats the findings of other research (e.g. Tymms, 2004) which has failed to find rises in standards as strong as the official data, based on SATs results, indicates, when different measures have been used, suggesting an element of 'teaching to the test' which has inflated the SATs scores over time.

This suggests that other approaches may be needed if awareness and knowledge in this area are to be increased in future. I have suggested in other publications (Lockwood, 1998 and 2005) that the approach used in the LINC project of placing teaching about standard English more clearly within the context of language variation, rather than vice versa, and making closer connections with children's own language use, is likely to be more effective. For example, I have described activities with children where I used the metaphor of a 'Wardrobe of Voices' to explore the concept of language variety and to investigate how standard English could hang in that wardrobe as one set of linguistic clothing to be worn at certain times. Children then related this to their own experience by drawing their own 'voice wardrobes' (Lockwood, 1998, p. 12-13). There are a couple of examples in *Grammar for Writing* (units 33 and 54) of other investigative and exploratory activities for meeting relevant NLS objectives, but this falls far short of the sort of rich and imaginative guidance which was developed, for example, through the national and local LINC projects.

The other question that needs to be asked, though, is whether there has been a decline in standards of awareness and knowledge in this area over the period of the surveys, or, alternatively, whether there have been changes in the acceptance of non-standard English which my surveys reflect. David Crystal has recently argued in *The Stories of English* that:

We seem to be leaving an era when the rules of Standard English, as selected and refined by prescriptive grammarians, totally conditioned our sense of acceptable usage, so that all other usages and varieties were considered to be inferior or corrupt ... And we seem to be approaching an era when non-standard usages and varieties, previously denigrated and ignored, are achieving a new presence and respectability within society...

(Crystal, 2005, p.523)

Crystal argues, appropriately using non-standard, that 'we ain't seen nothing yet', and that it is only a matter of time until the current period of transition eventually gives way, under the pressure of technological change in particular, to 'a world which will recognise a federation of standard and non-standard varieties, performing different life functions' (p.534). In this, he sees the educational

dimension as ‘crucial’, since: ‘In a few years’ time, the new generation of schoolchildren, well grounded in pragmatic principles, will be out there in society, able to counter unthinking prescriptive attitudes’ (p.525). Crystal also uses the ‘wardrobe analogy’, as he calls it, to describe the spectrum of different language styles (p.9).

A quick search of the online British National Corpus ([www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk)) certainly reveals plenty of examples of the NSE features from my questionnaire being used in British English in the late twentieth century. For example (to take features that the majority of the sample children accepted as SE), usage of *gotten* is widespread in speech and writing, and *hissself, me and my dad, beautifullest* and the plural form *pound* all appear in samples of speech, though not in written form.

Unfortunately, though, my research cannot support Crystal’s vision of a brave new world where ‘criticism of split infinitives will be gone forever’ (p.525), or foresee the emergence of a generation of school leavers raised on a pragmatic rather than a prescriptive approach to language variation. The evidence from the implementation of the NC and NLS does not provide proof of this. The NLS seems to me to invite a prescriptive approach as much as a pragmatic one, despite the efforts of *Grammar for Writing*. However, my surveys do seem to show that, implicitly, children at the end of primary schooling, and girls especially, may be responding to the increasing tolerance of non-standard variants in writing as well as speech, a manifestation of language change certainly influenced by television, mobile phone and computer technology. For example, a Microsoft Office 2000 spelling and grammar checker, when set to English (UK) as the dictionary language, identified only 9 out of the 19 NSE features in the research instrument and supplied a SE alternative for only 6 of them.

On the other hand, the children sampled show no evidence of knowing more, explicitly, about the continuum of standard and non-standard variation. If Crystal is right in his forecast, though, and effectively, standard English is changing, then this certainly raises questions about how we approach the area of standard English and language variation within the NC and NLS. For example, how long will we allow the gap between official versions of standard English and children’s evolving usage to widen before we accept that it might be the standard form of language which is changing rather than educational standards? And when will the definition and examples of SE in our school curricula cease being a description of usage and start to become prescriptive – or has this already happened? Educators have a particularly difficult balancing act to perform: regarded as upholders of standards by prescriptivists and language purists, they are also be in the front line of language change in their daily interactions with young people. Educators may also be ill equipped for this mediating role, if not secure themselves in their awareness and knowledge of SE and language variation, as evidence suggests they may not be (Lockwood and Raban, 1992; Lockwood, 1995). Making an updated version of the LINC guidance available to schools would be a positive first step in addressing both teachers’ and children’s continuing needs in this area.

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*Figure 1*  
[The 19 NSE features are italicised]

FIRST NAME \_\_\_\_\_ AGE \_\_\_\_\_ BOY / GIRL

**Part 1:** Are there any words in these sentences which don't sound right to you? If there are, please circle the words and write different ones underneath. If you think a sentence is OK, give it a tick at the side:

1. He doesn't know *nothing hisself*.
2. We *ain't* got *none*.
3. We *done* our work *proper*.
4. I fell off *of* the wall.
5. That's the boy *what* I told you about.
6. I never *seen nobody*.
7. She was the *beautifulest* of the two women.
8. They *wasn't* late.
9. I could *of* told you the answer.
10. He's *gotten* into trouble.
11. *Them* books *is* interesting.
12. *Me and my dad* paid five *pound* to go *up* London.

**Part 2:** Do you know what the words below mean? Have a guess if you're not sure:

ACCENT \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

DIALECT \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

STANDARD ENGLISH \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_