THE QUESTION OF STANDARD ENGLISH: SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON JOHN HONEY'S *LANGUAGE IS POWER*

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Abstract

In the global economy to which we are now irrievably condemned, there is no escaping the English language: innumerable citizens of the planet are surrounded by it, in their business or professional dealings, on the telephone, in letters, books, and scholarly articles, on radio and television, at the cinema, in the courses of thousands of language schools, in computer programmes, and on the Internet (English is even the language of this article!). The rise of English to the status of global lingua franca may be applauded or deplored, but it is here to stay, at least for our lifetime. A book like John Honey's *Language is Power* which, polemically but highly seriously, attempts to reflect on the state and nature of the English language today is necessarily to be welcomed.

In the present article, I offer a sympathetic examination of John Honey's main positions, as well as adding some of my own thoughts on English in the world today. The raison d'être of *Language is Power* is to challenge an orthodoxy which has dominated the teaching of English in Britain for several decades, namely that neither Standard English nor grammar should be systematically taught to school pupils. I examine in detail the various aspects of this orthodoxy and John Honey's counter-arguments, and then offer some considerations of my own on the possible historical and cultural reasons for the orthodoxy's existence, before briefly suggesting, in conclusion, some perspectives for the future development of English.

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1. A challenge to the orthodox

John Honey, the author of *Language Is Power* (1997), has had a long and distinguished career as professor of English at various universities around the globe - most recently at Osaka International University - and is eminently qualified to write on the English language. His positions are, however, highly controversial in the world of academic linguistics, largely because he has taken it upon himself to attack a number of its shibboleths. For several decades now, as anyone who has taught English will know, there has been a highly influential linguistic orthodoxy in academic and pedagogic circles in the English-speaking world, which asserts that to teach grammar and Standard English is at best unsound, and at worst downright oppressive. John Honey's openly expressed views **in favour of** Standard English have, indeed, caused him to be labelled as 'new Right' and considered a spokesman for a reactionary ideology which, as he makes clear, he has nothing to do with in either its evangelical or its ultra-free-market aspects[1]. It appears that in 'progressive' teaching milieux a concern with grammar or with rigour of vocabulary is often equated with right-wing

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[1] Honey, *Language is Power*, 218-219.

politics and general social conservatism: whether that assumption has any genuine intellectual substance will be considered in the present essay. At all events, John Honey's book, as a summation and synthesis of views he has defended in numerous other publications, has certainly set the cat among the linguistically correct pigeons.

A few points should be clarified first. This book is about *Standard English*, by which is meant the codified form of English spoken and written by educated native speakers (and, to whatever degree of accuracy, non-native speakers) worldwide. Standard English does of course have its variants - British English, American English, Indian English, etc; but, as Honey points out, the "differences ... are relatively small"[2], especially in the written form. Standard English is *not* a matter of accent; it *is* a matter of grammar, vocabulary and semantics. The same written English sentence can be pronounced by different speakers with a whole variety of accents, native and non-native, with no alterations at all to its vocabulary or grammar. This might appear obvious; unfortunately, to many it is not, and the discussion of English in lay circles (e.g. in newspapers' letter columns) is all too often bedevilled by a confusion between Standard English (which may be pronounced in any accent) and Received Pronunciation (which is the 'BBC accent' associated with south-east England and Oxford and Cambridge universities, and often perceived as 'correct' or 'posh'). John Honey stresses that *Language Is Power* is '*not a book about accent*'[3].

A large part of the book is taken up with an examination of the *teaching* of English (i.e., in this context, *the English language*), and it may be useful here to recall the different forms taken by such teaching today. These include: 1) the teaching of English in schools in, say, Britain, to children for whom it is a *native language* (or, for immigrant children, a second language); 2) the teaching of English in schools as a *second language* in, say, India or Botswana; 3) the teaching of or about the English language and how to teach it carried out in universities and colleges and aimed at native-speaker students; 4) the teaching of English as a *foreign language* in the state systems of non-English-speaking countries, in both schools and universities; and 5) the teaching of English as a foreign language to fee-paying, non-native-speaker students, both children and adults, in private language schools, both inside and outside English-speaking countries (the 'EFL industry'). The views on English teaching expressed by both Honey and his adversaries focus mostly on the British context, and, therefore, on cases 1) and 3): on *the teaching of English to native-speaker children in schools in the UK*, and on *the linguistic and educational theories taught in British universities and colleges that underpin that teaching in schools*. The other forms of English teaching, and experiences and views from outside the UK, are, of course, also relevant to the debate.

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2. The orthodoxy: no Standard English, no grammar

John Honey's aim is to refute a number of 'progressive' orthodoxies about language in general and English in particular, which may be summarised as follows: 1) all languages and all dialects are absolutely equal; 2) either Standard English does not exist at all, or it is 'only the dialect of the middle classes in South-East England'; 3) even if Standard English does exist, attempts to foist it on schoolchildren nationwide are a malevolent class conspiracy, and to teach it to working-class or ethnic minority children is to cut them off from their roots; 4) Standard English should not therefore be taught at all to working-class or ethnic minority

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[2] ibid, 1.
[3] ibid., 2.

children; 5) there is no such thing as a language error - 'whatever is said is right'; grammar should therefore not be taught to anyone.

I shall now look at these orthodoxies one by one, as John Honey presents and contests them, while also adding some comments of my own.

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2.1. 'All languages are equal'

The first thesis, and the one which ultimately underlies the others, is the notion of *absolute linguistic equality* - i.e. the belief that all languages and dialects are equally expressive, versatile and resourceful, and equally capable of expressing all possible shades of meaning under all circumstances. This implies not only that English, Russian, Hindi and Arabic are all quite as good as each other (a reasonable enough hypothesis), but - more controversially, a non-academic might think - that Standard English and the 'Geordie' of Newcastle-on-Tyne, Standard German and Upper Appenzell patois, or Standard Italian and the dialect of a remote Sicilian village, are absolutely and in all senses equal. John Honey quotes numerous prominent linguists to demonstrate the prevalence of this theory: "All varieties of a language are structured, complex, rule-governed systems which are entirely adequate for the needs of their speakers" (P. Trudgill, 1974); "All languages are equally complex and equally capable of expressing any idea in the universe" (V. Fromkin and R. Rodman, 1974); "There is virtually unanimous recognition among linguists that one language or dialect is as good as another" (D. Sutcliffe, 1982)[4]. A corollary of the absolute equality thesis is that the distinction between a language and a dialect is itself either false or purely political.

The confidence evident in these quotations suggests that not only John Honey but their authors themselves regard these views as representative of a virtually unanimous consensus. Indeed, he cites so many authorities (a good dozen) on this point that there seems to be no question of selective quotation. Honey quotes no less a figure than Professor David Crystal, possibly Britain's best-known academic linguist, as declaring that "all languages meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers" (*What is Linguistics?*, 1968[5]). This position may be confirmed from another work by Crystal (not cited by Honey), his 1971 book *Linguistics*: "Every language ... has enough sounds, structures and vocabulary to cope with its own needs. A language may not have as many words as English ..., but ... it has enough words for its own purposes."[6]. Crystal quotes the position of an earlier linguist, Edward Sapir: "We know of no people that is not possessed of a fully developed language ... The lowliest South African bushman speaks in the forms of a rich symbolic system that is in essence perfectly comparable to the speech of the cultivated Frenchman"[7].

John Honey's questioning of this doctrine of linguistic equality is not a flag-waving attempt to vaunt the superiority of English. He argues that certain major languages (of which English is one) have, over the centuries, displayed a particularly high capacity for survival and unusual adaptability and flexibility. Among these, he cites not only French and German, but also Arabic and Hebrew, so he cannot be accused of Eurocentric chauvinism. He affirms,

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[4] all quoted in Honey, 7.
[5] quoted in Honey, 19.
[6] Crystal, *Linguistics*, 71-72.
[7] Edward Sapir, *Language* (1921); quoted in Crystal, op. cit., 49.

however, that some languages are more flexible and more inclusive than others, and, above all, that the standard variety of a language is likely to have a much wider vocabulary and a far greater range of constructions, styles and registers than non-standard varieties of the same language, and will therefore be usable *in more, and in more varied circumstances*. Dialects, he argues, typically use a "restricted code" in which "utterances can often be interpreted only by reference to prior knowledge" (to a context familiar only to members of a small group), whereas the "elaborated code" of the standard language "tends to be context-free"; "standard languages are multi-functional, whereas dialects tend to serve limited functions"[8].

John Honey does not actually quote and compare passages from Standard English and dialect to prove his affirmation of the greater lexical and syntactic resourcefulness of the standard variety, but convincing examples could no doubt be mustered. The equality thesis may, however, also be questioned from two other points of view - the historical and the functional.

If all languages are equal, why do some survive and flourish over time while others die out? It is too easy to blame colonialism and imperialism, or to reproduce the cliché that 'a standard language is a dialect with an army' (an oft-heard view which Honey cites)[9]. That aphorism may sound radical, but has the disadvantage of not corresponding to the facts. There is an Austrian army, and there was an Austrian empire for centuries, but no-one claims there is an Austrian language. There has been no Welsh army for centuries, but nobody denies Welsh is a language. Belgium has two main languages (neither of them unique to the country), but only one army. In any case, the fate of languages in history shows no simple one-to-one correspondence with the fate of nations. If one takes the case of the non-Latin languages of the subject peoples of the Roman empire, different languages prove to have had different destinies. Greek has survived across the centuries, retaining its alphabet and its distinctive characteristics despite years of Ottoman rule; modern Greek is quite recognisably a latter-day version of the tongue of Aristotle. Of the Thracian languages of the Balkans, Illyrian lived on to evolve into modern Albanian; the closely-related Dacian, however, was absorbed into Latin and mutated into Romanian (in which a couple of hundred Dacian words survive today). Romanian, which is a neo-Latin tongue, has persisted over time, despite the non-existence of a unified Romanian state proper until the nineteenth century, while the only other member of the eastern Romance branch, Dalmatian, did not outlast that century, and has no speakers at all today. Over the intervening centuries, there was no Dalmatian state; both Romania and Dalmatia spent long years under alien empires, and imperialism therefore seems insufficient as an explanation for the survival or extinction of languages. It is more likely that Romanian survived thanks to characteristics of resilience and flexibility which Dalmatian, for whatever reasons, lacked.

To turn to today's world, the thesis that ***all variants*** of a language are equally expressive and flexible does not necessarily stand up to examination. One may consider the case of minority speech forms in the Italian-speaking world. Arturo Tosi, in his study *Language and society in a changing Italy* (2001), notes that the multiplicity of Italian dialects, which often vary even from village to village, have tended not to provide their speakers with the full range of vocabulary needed for life in the urban communities to which they migrated (whether inside or outside Italy) in the mid-twentieth century: "For the majority of Italians who immigrated soon after the last war, the village vernacular could not provide the language

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[8] Honey, 22-23, 36.
[9] ibid., 38.

they needed to talk about their new 'urbanised' lives", whereas "standard Italian of course had the necessary repertoire", as did English for those who emigrated to the US or Australia[10]. The highly localised and typically rural forms of dialect speech are unlikely to have the flexibility, the wide vocabulary and the usability in a multitude of contexts which ***do*** characterise the standard form of a language.

In response to Crystal's contention that "every language ... has enough sounds, structures and vocabulary to cope with its own needs", one conclusion might be that Piedmontese or Venetian dialect may, indeed, be perfectly well adapted to a limited range of uses within a small, socially closed community; but it does not follow that those same speech forms possess all the lexical, syntactic and semantic resources that are needed for communication between such a community and the wider world.

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2.2. 'Standard English does not exist'

The equality thesis is a general belief about *language*, which in its turn affects attitudes to specific *languages*. In the case of English, it leads to the view that Standard English is 'no better' than dialect or non-standard forms of English, and should therefore not be given any special priority in the world at large. Some of John Honey's adversaries seem even to have pushed this position to the point of denying the very existence of Standard English. Honey quotes Roy Harris, professor of linguistics at Oxford, as doubting in a 1988 article *whether it is possible at all* to "determine what standard usage is, either in the English or in any other linguistic community"[11], and another British academic, Alan Sinfield, writing in a respected weekly in 1994, as dismissing Standard English as merely "the variant used by many white, middle-class people in the south-east of England"[12]. So crudely British a definition of an international phenomenon may smack of insular provincialism, but it represents a widely-held view, often expressed in the press. The implication would be that if Standard English is *only* a class and/or regional form of speech posing as a universal phenomenon, then it is a purely ideological, illusory phenomenon which lacks any objective existence.

This extreme position is not supported by the recognised authorities. The 1996 edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage*[13] states in its entry 'Standard English' that British Standard English is "the form of educated English used in their formal programmes by the broadcasting authorities based in London, by the London-based national newspapers, and by teachers of English to young people in this country and to foreigners"; this implies a particular prevalence of the standard form in the capital, but does not suggest that it is a mere regional phenomenon - rather, Standard English is seen as having a national and international reach. The *Longman Guide to English Usage* (1988), co-edited (with Janet Whitcut) by the well-known linguist Sidney Greenbaum, offers the following definition of Standard English - in a broad, not a merely 'British' sense: "the type of English that is used by educated people throughout the English-speaking world. It is a variety with distinctive features of vocabulary and grammar, and not an accent (type of pronunciation); Standard English is therefore spoken by people with different accents ... It is the English that is taught in the education systems of

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[10] Tosi, *Language and society in a changing Italy*, 228.
[11] quoted in Honey, 62.
[12] Alan Sinfield, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 15 July 1994; quoted in Honey, 5.
[13] *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, 740.

English-speaking countries and is also taught to foreigners; it is the variety that appears in print and (for most serious purposes) is the spoken language of the mass media."[14] In another work co-edited by Greenbaum, this time with Randolph Quirk, *A Student's Grammar of the English Language* (1990), we read: "Educated English ... is codified in dictionaries, grammars, and guides to usage, and it is taught in the school system at all levels. It is almost exclusively the language of printed matter. Because educated English is thus accorded implicit social and political sanction, it comes to be referred to as STANDARD ENGLISH", and: "The degree of acceptance of a single standard of English throughout the world, across a multiplicity of political and social systems, is a truly remarkable phenomenon ... the world-wide agreement ... seems actually to be increasing under the impact of closer world communication"[15]. In more general terms, i.e. not referring exclusively to English, Arturo Tosi, in his book of 2001 cited above, defines "the notion of the standard language" as "the linguistic form that is conventionally regarded as correct and acceptable by educated native speakers"[16].

These definitions are worth quoting at length, as they bring out several features of the standard language - its relation to educatedness, its use in printed matter, its international reach, and the role played by consensus in its acceptance - that are absent from Sinfield's reductionist class-and-regional definition. At this point it may be useful to move from definition to example, and to consider a number of real-life instances of Standard English, as written by native or second-language speakers in different parts of the globe.

For this purpose, I shall now quote and compare three newspaper articles of different provenances. Text 1), an instance of British English, is from an article in *The Economist* (29 November 1997, p. 40) on the prospects for the then leader of the British Conservative Party, entitled "Twitchy times for William Hague":

1) *"Nothing is so fatal to a politician as the public perception that he is a twit. Vanity; stupidity; duplicity; lack of ability; these need not impede a successful political career, as a glance down the list of Tony Blair's cabinet reveals. But once people think you are a twit, you are up the proverbial gumtree: your utterances discounted, your actions ignored, your very appearance an opportunity for ridicule.*
This reflection is prompted by William Hague; or rather by the reaction to his reaction to the Tory massacre in the Winchester by-election on November 20th. Next day, Mr Hague decided to expel from his party Peter Temple-Morris, a ' wet' backbencher who had been making menacing noises about Mr Hague's reinforced stance against British membership of the single European currency.
When Mr Hague discussed this with his little gang of intimates, it must have seemed a bumper wheeze. Tory voters were punishing disunity; so would he."

This text will not be crystal-clear to someone unfamiliar to its context, namely politics in the UK. It contains a number of lexical items specifically pertaining to British politics: 'Tory' (Conservative), 'wet' (liberal Conservative) and 'backbencher' (an MP who is a member of neither the government nor of the front bench of an opposition party). Besides, it includes various colloquial and slang terms, some specific to British English: 'twitchy' ('insecure'), 'twit' ('idiot'), 'bumper wheeze' ('brilliant stratagem'), 'up the gumtree' ('in trouble'). A US

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[14] Greenbaum and Whitcut, *Longman Guide to English Usage*, 676.
[15] Quirk and Greenbaum, *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*, 5 and 6.
[16] Tosi, op. cit., p. 40.

reader might have some difficulty in understanding this text; it is, in fact, typical of the house style of *The Economist*, which favours the liberal use of colloquialisms ('biff' and 'miff', 'iffy' and 'sniffy'), but at times loses in universal accessibility what it gains in (very British) informality.

Text 2) hails from the US, and is from *Newsweek* (4 May 1998, p. 36):

2) *"But can another centrist knock off Gore? It won't be easy. Despite the veep's stumbles - his measly $53 check to charities, his managing to tour tornado-devastated Alabama without touching any victims, his Buddhist-temple follies - Gore is nevertheless the likely heir to what is (so far) a charmed economy and falling crime rates. Still, front-runners almost always falter. This is where Kerry, Kerrey and Bradley come in. They are Virtual Gores. Fiftysomething dark-haired white guys, they have Al's wonkishness. But only Bradley has his stiffness; Kerry has some of the 'Last Hurrah' Boston pol in him; Kerrey displays an earthy humor on Don Imus' radio show and in Congress."*

The context here is the run-up to the Democratic presidential nomination for the elections of the year 2000: sitting Vice-President Al Gore is being compared with three potential rivals. Here as in the *Economist* piece, the context, this time of US domestic politics, is very specific, and there are a number of highly local references (episodes involving Gore, the radio allusion) with which a British reader is unlikely to be familiar. There are also several distinctively American slang terms - not just the internationally known 'guys', but also 'veep' (Vice-President), 'pol' (politician) and 'wonkishness', of which at least the first two would not be understood out-of-context in Britain. In addition, there are two distinctively American spellings - 'check' and 'humor'. All in all, this paragraph is as specifically American as the *Economist* extract is eminently British.

Text 3) is from the business pages of the Bombay edition of the *Times of India* for 24 September 1991 (p. 13):

3) *"Medical Microtechnology Ltd., a Gujarat based unit with an authorised share capital of Rs 50 lakh, has become the first company to get immediate Reserve Bank of India (RBI) approval for a foreign tie-up within 48 hours.*
The company is collaborating with Microtitanium Ltd, of the UK for the manufacture of surgical and medical instruments. The foreign partner will hold 50 percent (Rs 7.5 lakh) of the total paid-up capital of Rs 15 lakh.
The unit, at a total cost of Rs 38 lakh, will be put up in Valsad, Gujarat and will have an installed capacity of 35,000 instruments per annum."

Here, there are specific local references - to the state of Gujarat, the national currency (Rs = rupees) and the Indian financial system - and one distinctively Indian term, 'lakh' (= a hundred thousand - a borrowing from Hindi which is not used in English outside India). Once again, then, a knowledge of the local context is required for the full understanding of the text.

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The place-specific elements in all three extracts are undeniable. However, it does not follow that British, American and Indian English are mutually incomprehensible, or that an intelligent reader from outside the text's sphere of origin cannot guess the unfamiliar words and references from context, and manage to grasp at least the general drift of the piece. What

separates the three texts is ultimately less important than what links them: that is, the basic vocabulary and syntactic conventions of educated English. In these pieces, despite such localisms as 'twit', 'veep' or 'lakh', we find a number of common factors: in all three, the basic word-order subject-verb-object; common patterns of tense usage; an alternation of longer and shorter sentences, pointing to a flexibility of register; nouns used adjectivally ('the Winchester by-election', 'Buddhist-temple follies', 'RBI approval'); in 1) and 3), an alternation of active and passive verbs; and in 2) and 3), phrasal verbs ('knock off', 'put up'). The conclusion must surely be that Standard English *does exist*, and that texts written within its conventions, be they from London, Washington or Bombay, are essentially comprehensible to any educated speaker of the language. The Indian piece, in particular, shows that it is more than possible for second-language speakers to produce perfectly correct examples of Standard English - a point made by John Honey, who, indeed, cites the *Times of India* itself as proof[17]; it might be added that Indo-English, while it has preserved a number of archaic forms, such as 'thrice', which have disappeared from UK and US usage, has also coined such interesting neologisms as 'in-charge' (= person responsible for something in a company, etc), which could usefully be taken up by the English-speaking world in general.

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The status and nature of Standard English may be further clarified by reference to literature. The fact that literary texts containing terms or usages that are considered non-standard (exoticisms or regionalisms) can still be read and understood by native speakers anywhere in the English-speaking world might, perhaps, be evoked to argue that English is so infinitely varied that no standard form of it can be said to exist. Textual analysis, however, does not support such a contention, as I shall now endeavour to show with reference to examples of writing, first from India (with elements of localism), and then from the US (with elements of non-standard, colloquial American).

The following passage from Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (1981), concerning a party thrown in pre-independence India in Quetta (now in Pakistan) by the three Shakil sisters, reads:

"Can it really have been the case that the few non-white guests - local zamindars and their wives, whose wealth had once been trifling in comparison with the Shakil crores - stood together in a tight clump of rage, gazing balefully at the cavorting sahibs? That all these persons left simultaneously after a very few moments, without having broken bread or eaten salt, abandoning the sisters to the colonial authorities?"[18]

The reader will notice a number of indigenous subcontinental words - 'zamindars' (landlords), 'crores' (tens of millions) and the better-known 'sahibs'; but these localisms are neither numerous nor obscure enough to detract from understanding or enjoyment of the writing. Otherwise, the lexical and syntactic resources deployed are those of an English which is both highly idiomatic ('clump', 'balefully', 'cavorting') and visibly sophisticated (complex sequence of tenses, symmetrical use of dependent participles, coordinate clauses). In other words, this is a piece of international Standard English, spiced by some South Asian terms.

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[17] Honey, 250.
[18] Rushdie, *Shame*, 16.

Turning now to the US, I shall now look briefly at one famous example of the capacity of American writing to absorb and include certain elements of colloquial or non-standard speech, Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Twain's novel takes the form of the first-person narrative of Huck, a poor-white adolescent boy, and is written in what might at first sight seem a non-standard form of English, as in this passage:

"When I struck the town, I see there warn't nobody out in the storm, so I never hunted for no back streets, but humped it straight through the main one; and when I begun to get towards our house I aimed my eye and set it. No light there; the house all dark - which made me feel sorry and disappointed, I don't know why. But at last, just as I was sailing by, flash comes the light in Mary Jane's window! and my heart swelled up sudden, like to bust; and the same second the house and all was behind me in the dark, and wasn't ever going to be before me no more in this world. She was the best girl I ever see, and had the most sand."[19]

There are certainly a number of non-standard elements here - double negatives ('warn't nobody', 'never hunted for no back streets', 'wasn't ... no more') and non-standard verb-forms ('warn't'; 'begun' for 'began'; 'see' for 'seen') - as well as several colloquialisms ('humped it', 'bust', 'sand'). However, the sentences also reveal a certain logical construction (adverbial clauses of consequence - 'so ...' - and simultaneity - 'just as ...'; coordinate clauses; 'which' replacing a whole idea) which betrays the sophistication and sense of relatedness that characterise Standard English - which was, in any case, the English Mark Twain usually wrote. The English of *Huckleberry Finn* is best taken as a literary sleight-of-hand, a case of Standard English *impersonating* a non-standard form by taking up some of its expressions and constructions, to create an impression of immediacy and authenticity - the illusion of Huck's 'speaking voice'.

The kind of American writing practised by Twain, oft-praised for its immediacy and expressiveness, acquires those qualities *not* by being written in non-standard English, but by bringing some of the bluntness and directness of non-standard forms into the standard language, in a process of borrowing, appropriation or cross-fertilisation. It does seem, though, that the flexibility at work in this process - the capacity to absorb, expand and vary - is actually a characteristic of the *standard* language rather than of non-standard forms.

These examples suggest that, despite the diatribes of some of John Honey's opponents, Standard English *does exist*, and that it is the spoken and written form of English used by the educated worldwide, subject to certain national and regional variations and irrespective of accent. In any case, if there were no such thing as Standard English, economic and scholarly communication within or between different English-speaking countries would be impossible, and language schools would be besieged by irate students demanding their money back.

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2. 3. 'Standard English is a class conspiracy'

However, there remains the argument that, even if Standard English does exist, it is still nothing but a class conspiracy, and therefore *should not exist*. Some of John Honey's opponents employ historical arguments purporting to show that Standard English is a relatively *recent* creation, no older than the Industrial Revolution and therefore coeval with industrial capitalism in its modern form; Honey devotes considerable space to countering this

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[19] Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 272.

position with his own historical analysis. The orthodoxy which he attacks may be represented by an influential British Marxist academic, the late Raymond Williams. This position is summarised in the entry on 'Standards' in William's' reference work of 1976, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*[20]: "In [the mid-nineteenth century] there was the curious case of *Standard English*: a selected (class-based) use taken as an authoritative example of correctness, which, widely backed by educational institutions, attempted to convict a majority of native speakers of English of speaking their own language 'incorrectly'." John Honey quotes these comments, adding the qualification that Williams did in fact concede that "the written standard ... was established very much earlier"[21]. It does appear that in *Keywords* Williams is referring to the *spoken* language ('speakers', 'speaking'), although his use of the term 'Standard English' in this context then becomes confusing: is he talking about *accent* alone (RP), or accent plus (spoken) grammar and vocabulary (RP plus spoken SE)? This terminological uncertainty is, unfortunately, typical of the confusion between spoken and written that dogs the entire debate.

Honey examines in detail the contention that Standard English is a nineteenth-century creation. The defenders of this position include Williams (*The Long Revolution*, 1961), Harris (*The Language Machine*, 1987) and Tony Crowley (*The Politics of Discourse*, 1989). John Honey denies Harris' claim that Standard English can be boiled down to a neologism introduced in the 1880s for ideological purposes by the compilers of the first *Oxford English Dictionary*, counter-arguing that, for the spoken as well as the written language, the *concept* of Standard English existed centuries before the *term*: what we call Standard English today was simply known in earlier periods under other names. He traces the first known occurrence of the modern term back to 1836 (in the *Quarterly Review*), but shows, convincingly enough, that other terms - 'true English', 'the King's English' - had much the same sense in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, Honey goes back further, dating the emergence of *written and spoken* Standard English to the late Middle Ages and to the appearance of printing (introduced to England in 1476)[22]. He does not mention that the same period saw the emergence in England, for the first time, of a national civil service and of the systematic keeping of national statistics. The printing-press creates a nationwide market of the written word; a central civil service cannot function without a lingua franca. One may conclude that Standard English appeared alongside the modern centralised state.

However, if it can be reasonably established that Standard English is a much older creation than some claim, the link with the state still raises the question of whether the standard language is not a mere instrument of class domination. The reviewer of Honey's book in *The Economist* (27 September 1997) argues that his historical argument, even if well-grounded, "does not prove [his opponents] basically wrong ... whenever it began, it could be that teaching standard English is indeed a means, and an intended one, of cultural subordination"[23].

Here again, Honey draws on history for counter-arguments. He points out that the theoretical rejection of the standard language has not always been a constant on the left. In 1818, the British radical writer William Cobbett actually compiled a *Grammar of the English Language*, "for the use of soldiers, apprentices and ploughboys", seeing Standard English as a

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[20] Williams, *Keywords*, 248-249.
[21] Honey, 59, 60.
[22] ibid, 72-77, *passim*.
[23] *The Economist*, review of *Language Is Power*, 102.

"gateway" allowing the oppressed to assert their "rights and liberties"[24]. In the 1930s, the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci eloquently defended the teaching of his country's standard language, declaring: "Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history". This passage from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, quoted by John Honey[25], is, interestingly, also reproduced by Arturo Tosi in his 2001 study of the Italian language. Tosi underlines "the support for the teaching of grammar, favoured by the anti-Fascist scholar and politician Antonio Gramsci", stressing that Gramsci thought "the mastery of the national language could be instrumental for a new supra-regional, cohesive awareness of the working classes" and, "for this reason, … strongly objected to the proposal of the Education Minister, Giovanni Gentile, to remove the teaching of grammar from the school curriculum altogether"[26]. Despite the radical pretensions of some of Honey's opponents, it is hard to see how either Cobbett or Gramsci can be enlisted as a forbear of the New Right.

Even so, and whatever the historical arguments, the cardinal issue remains the teaching of English today. Here, John Honey argues that the class-conspiracy ideologues are actually disadvantaging those people whose interests they profess to have at heart; and this brings us to the next point at issue.

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2.4. 'Standard English should not be taught'

On this question, the anti-standard camp maintains that to teach the national and international form of English to disadvantaged pupils (dialect or creole speakers) is an act of class or racial oppression, because it forces them to use language forms which are alien to their everyday experience and to the values of their communities.

John Honey counter-argues that the acquisition of Standard English should be seen as a phenomenon not of class but of education: "The defining quality symbolised by the use of standard English is not social rank as such, but instead *educatedness*"[27]. As he sees it, *Standard English is a means to individual empowerment*: it opens the door to the benefits - professional, cultural and (often but not always) financial - that education brings in its wake.

That learning Standard English empowers the individual may, indeed, be deduced from the fact that, without exception, all of its detractors (as quoted by John Honey) *express their objections to Standard English in … Standard English*. Assuming Honey's use of quotation to be fair, it would seem that his opponents *only* resort to dialect or creole variants of English where they quote (however favourably) other people's self-expression in those language forms, and do *not* couch their own anti-Standard English polemics in those forms - rather, they undermine their own case by *using the language of their avowed enemy*. Given this, one has surely to lend an ear to John Honey's comment that "it is easy for someone who has himself moved upwards socially from lesser beginnings to a university professorship ... to belittle the ambition of others who would like to do the same"[28]. One has to ask the question:

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[24] quoted in Honey, 91-92.
[25] quoted ibid., 111n.
[26] Tosi, op. cit., 64.
[27] Honey, 131.
[28] ibid, 115.

why do Harris, Crowley and the rest not write and publish their diatribes in, say, South Yorkshire dialect?

At this point, the detractors of the standard could argue that Honey's argument is perniciously individualist, and that those working-class or minority pupils who do successfully acquire the standard language end up reneging on their origins, assimilating to society's ruling groups and thus becoming class traitors. To quote the *Economist* review again, this position would have it that "the elite uses language to skim off and assimilate to itself the brighter members of the mob"[29]. John Honey claims, plausibly enough, that his opponents are somewhat romanticising the values of the old type of working-class community - the "informal ties of kin and friendship in close-knit working-class communities, which generate ... *solidarity* based on social class and locality"[30]. It may be pointed out that in Britain, while such communities, in areas like Durham or South Wales, are overwhelmingly Labour-voting, not all progressive-minded citizens necessarily identify today with those 'ties of kin' in their traditionalist forms; and that if 'locality' is so important, the degree of acceptance by the 'close-knit community' of outsiders, let alone 'foreigners', may be at best problematic. Nor does the notion of dialect as a marker of radicalism explain why Standard English was the form chosen to propagate their ideas by such indubitable radicals as the Chartists (as Honey points out), or the early Fabians, or, indeed, William Morris (of whom more later).

It may be added here - a point which Honey probably does not sufficiently stress, though he does remind us that, for instance, Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech "achieved its impact because it was in standard English"[31] - that *Standard English enables empowerment, not only of the individual, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of groups.* It does so by offering a lingua franca allowing social groups (including disadvantaged groups) to communicate among one another. If the 'language radicals' had their way in Britain, the national language would eventually shatter into a mosaic of mutually incomprehensible dialects, whose speakers would only able to communicate by painfully learning an infinity of different speech-forms. By contrast, as things stand, radical or minority groups - trade unions, NGOs, organisations of racial or sexual minorities, those affected by disabilities, and so on - are able to liaise, network and organise at national, rather than purely neighbourhood or regional level. As John Honey says, "standardisation is essential for communication outside a local area"[32]; or as Gramsci put it in the *Prison Notebooks*, "without the mastery of the common standard version of a national language, one is inevitably destined to function only at the periphery of national life"[33].

The rhetoric of the anti-standard campaigners denies the very possibility of bilingualism, or, to use a more specialised term, 'bilectalism' - of individuals learning to use *both Standard English and dialect* in accordance with the situation, and, indeed, the observed fact that (to quote Quirk and Greenbaum's *Student's Grammar*) "many people can communicate in more than one regional or social variety and can therefore (consciously or unconsciously) switch varieties according to the situation"[34]. In the last analysis, the anti-standard logic would produce a planet split into discrete fragments, all hermetically sealed off

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[29] *Economist* review, loc. cit.
[30] Honey, 130.
[31] ibid., 41.
[32] ibid., 125.
[33] quoted in Tosi, loc. cit.
[34] Quirk and Greenbaum, op. cit., 4.

from each other - a collection of Swiss cantons *without* the benefits of a standard language. Whether this is the best way forward for humanity is an open question.

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2.5. 'Grammar should not be taught'

If Standard English should not be taught to non-standard speakers on the grounds that they should not be 'corrected', it follows that teachers should also refrain from correcting the spoken and written English of those who do speak the standard tongue at home. The anti-Standard English and anti-grammar tendencies in the world of British education are not one and the same thing, but historically both appeared around the same time, and conceptually they visibly overlap.

The anti-grammar position may be summarised as follows: 1) *theoretically*, the rules and concepts of English grammar should not be explained to pupils; and 2) *practically*, nobody's grammar mistakes should be corrected. This position is justified on the grounds that teaching grammar inhibits pupils' creativity, and/or that grammatical structures can be absorbed intuitively by exposure to literature, in a process of osmosis[35]. It may, however, be counter-argued that unclear and confusing creative writing, whatever its potential merits, is unlikely to attract or retain readers; that unclear and confusing functional writing can have damaging results in the real world; and all users of a language can only benefit from having the 'metalanguage' (set of terms and concepts for talking about language) which the study of grammar provides.

The rejection of grammar teaching became orthodoxy in British schools around the early 1970s. The old style of English teaching, with box analysis and parsing, rapidly gave way to the new, 'meaningful and relevant' doctrine of no grammar. If the study of grammar survived that onslaught, it seems to have been thanks to a rather different development of the same period, namely the rise of EFL, or English as a Foreign Language. EFL teaching, while it experimented with a wide range of methods, signally did *not* throw grammar out of the window - possibly because at private language schools the adult students, at least, are free to vote with their feet, and may do just that if they feel they are learning nothing. The anti-grammar movement has nonetheless had a certain, relatively limited, influence in the EFL world. One popular EFL textbook from the 1970s, L.G. Alexander's *First Things First*, attempted to teach everything through repetition and drills, with no explanation whatever for the students; but the back-up manual *did* explain the structures behind the drills, *for the teacher*. Another EFL philosophy, the 'communicative approach', gives priority to rooting out those mistakes which cause confusion and distort the intended message. This is a rational enough approach, although it should be added that communication will remain problematic unless the learner has acquired some *overall* grasp of the basic grammatical system. At all events, the ill-defined idealism prevailing in state schools seems not to have worn so well in the more pragmatic world of teaching English to non-native speakers who want results.

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2.6. A culture of error

The rejection of grammar is underpinned by the theoretical notion that 'there is no such thing as an error' - that everything every native speaker says on every occasion is by definition linguistically correct, and, therefore, no-one born to the English language can possibly perpetrate a single error ('whatever is said is right'). This is, presumably, an

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[35] see Honey, 169-172.

extension of the doctrine of linguistic equality: if all languages are equal, then all utterances in a given language are also equal.

This could be described as an 'anything goes' position, and indeed John Honey's book refers to certain disagreements between him and David Crystal on this point. Crystal, reviewing an earlier book of Honey's in 1983, "denied that linguists had ever been implicated in the promotion of the view that 'anything goes' in English usage"[36], accusing Honey of serving up a parodic version of his opponents' positions. Certainly, Crystal's book *Linguistics* declares that the linguist "is not advocating irresponsibility in language use: he is not saying to the teacher, 'It doesn't matter. Anything goes!'"[37]. Honey, however, maintains against Crystal that, whatever qualifications the theoretical linguists may have made in their published works, in practice the popularisation of their ideas has served to encourage laissez-faire attitudes among teachers: "they had caused considerable harm ... in the insecurity they now caused to teachers who were now unsure about correcting children's spoken or written English".[38]

The anti-error ideology needs to be looked at in terms of its potential consequences. If there is no such thing as a *grammatical* error, does it follow that there no such thing as a *semantic* error either? Is a teacher wrong to correct a pupil who uses the non-existent (and meaningless) expression 'calm and collective' where 'calm and collected' is the intended sense? If there are no semantic errors, do errors of fact exist? Is the university student who thinks Hitler was Russian to be allowed to remain in her ignorance? Should newspapers still feel obliged to correct mistakes of fact, or misunderstandings arising from grammatical mistakes? A few years back, the *Guardian*, reporting on Bosnia, mentioned proposals for a 'Muslim-free zone', where what was meant was the opposite, 'a Muslim free zone'. The problem was not merely one of punctuation, since the first phrase is: noun + adjective + noun, while the second is: adjective + adjective + noun. In some contexts, a mistake like this could have disastrous consequences: but if no native speaker can ever be wrong, how can anyone be blamed? One might be forgiven for concluding that for some of John Honey's adversaries, no-one can ever make, or ever has made, a single pronunciation, grammatical, syntactic, lexical, semantic *or* factual error in any circumstances whatever.

Indeed, if there is no such a thing as a language error, do *professional* errors exist, and are consumers being reactionary and elitist if they dare exercise their right to complain? Is there no longer any such thing as a journalist's error, or does it simply 'not matter' if reporters get their facts wrong? In "Myth and Misquotation", an essay of 1988 included in his 1995 book *The Dustbin of History*, the American essayist Greil Marcus complains, with a fair artillery of factual evidence, that today journalists and non-fiction authors often simply do not care if they have misquoted or misrepresented their sources; he cites the example of a speech by a student, Mario Savio, at a major protest at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in 1964, of which he says: "Once past the year 1964, these words, for all the hundreds of times they have been quoted, printed, published, have almost never appeared as they were spoken. Almost no one has gotten them right. Almost no one has bothered to get them right" - even though they are still available, on a phonograph recording at the university library. Reflecting on "the way in which errors can poison history", Marcus laments that anyone who, like himself, tries to insist on the historical record rather than the received

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[36] quoted in Honey, 207.
[37] Crystal, op. cit., 73.
[38] Honey, loc. cit.

version tends to be fobbed off as a "crank", a "lonely protector of the true text"[39]. The language relativists may, in their extreme form, bear some degree of responsibility for creating a culture of error - for encouraging shoddy professional standards right across society, in no-one's objective interest.

Some of the relativists argue that any text can have a quite unlimited number of meanings, and that there is no such thing as a 'literal' or 'surface' meaning. This view, which was fashionable in the 1980s among followers of the deconstructionist theory of literature, is extended by some from literary criticism to apply to any kind of text whatever. Thus, one of John Honey's adversaries, the American professor James Gee - apparently an opponent of the very notion of functional literacy - would, apparently, dismiss out of hand the findings of a survey which concluded that many Americans are not able to understand simple pharmaceutical instructions, on the grounds that "there is no one correct reading of the label on an aspirin bottle" (Honey, 231-232).[40] It is reasonable enough to say there is *more than one* way of reading instructions - but not to conclude from this that there are *infinite* readings. There is often more than one right answer to a question, but this does not mean there are no wrong answers.

The notion of the non-existence of error has been taken by some to the extreme of recommending that teachers of English to *foreign learners* should not correct their students' errors. Obviously, some non-native speaker mistakes are more serious than others, and the student may be inhibited if the teacher comes down on every single error. However, in many cases the correction or self-correction of mistakes will protect foreign learners being seen as ungifted or comical by linguistically naive native speakers - not to mention saving them from embarrassing situations (the student from Seville who thinks 'constipated' means 'having a cold', as in Spanish 'constipado', will not get the right medicine at the chemist's). Those who believe 'errors do not exist' are propagating more, not less, international misunderstanding.

By contrast, those who, like John Honey, defend the teaching of grammar are presuming that errors of various kinds do exist, raising the question of *correctness* in its various aspects - a point which leads on to another controversial aspect of English, namely spelling.

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2.7. Spelling

Another facet of the correctness question is spelling - which is surprisingly often confused with grammar in lay discussions, though the two are in fact separate aspects of language. There are two dimensions here: first, whether teachers should enforce the existing rules; and second, whether those rules themselves stand in need of change.

On the first point, the orthodoxy of the 1960s and 1970s maintained, with spelling as with grammar, that to correct errors was an outrage against individual creativity. This is all very well, but surely many readers find misspellings an unnecessary obstacle to the reception, let alone the enjoyment, of the author's message. More seriously, spelling mistakes can cause misunderstandings and impede communication: to cite one common error, 'complimentary medicine samples' (free medicines) are <u>not</u> the same thing as 'complementary medicine

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[39] Marcus, *The Dustbin of History*, 39, 40.
[40] quoted in Honey, 231-232.

samples' (homeopathic or other alternative products). Misspellings can also convey false information about a word's connotations or origins: to write 'reign in [sic)]' for 'rein in' (an error perpetrated by the *Guardian* within living memory) supposes that the expression relates to monarchs rather than horses, thus creating a possible semantic distortion. As with grammar, one may reasonably defend a policy of coming down more heavily on spelling mistakes that obstruct communication; but here too, there is no prior certainty that learners will sense which mistakes actually are more serious unless they already have a reasonable grasp of the system as a whole.

Another question is whether the rules of English spelling, which no-one could claim are particularly logical, should be simplified through reform. John Honey considers spelling only briefly, ruling out "radical reform" but suggesting there are "arguments ... for piecemeal change in instances which give rise to constant confusion". He proposes, for instance, changing the spelling of 'read' (the past participle) to '*redd*' while keeping the infinitive form as 'read'[41]. I would argue, however, that in practice to try to reform English spelling - even to the limited degree Honey suggests - would raise very serious problems.

The notion has a certain popularity, stretching back at least to Bernard Shaw. Thus, in a letter to the *Guardian* published on 21 January 1998, Ken Spencer, a lecturer in media studies at Hull University, proposed a root-and-branch reform ("make the rules more regular, and spelling will improve"). The idea of simplification may be superficially attractive, but it may be counter-argued that good reasons exist for leaving English orthography as it is. Given the huge number of countries that use English as a first, second or foreign language worldwide, there is no guarantee that all would adopt a new standard. Nor would there be any sure way of enforcing the 'new' rules internationally on private or individual use, especially on the Internet. In addition, a major reform, supposing it to be enforceable, would have the long-term consequence of rendering any texts printed prior to it unreadable to all but a few specialists. This would usher in a new form of censorship: works not chosen for 're-spelling' would disappear from view, and the new editions of other works might be not just *re-spelt*, but *re-written* 1984-style, to bring them into line with the criteria of political correctness or some other belief-system yet to be invented. As things stand, today out-of-copyright classics can be reprinted from old editions and sold at ten pence; the same old editions can also be (legally) scanned and put on the Internet. Spelling reform would scotch these forms of inexpensive access to the literary heritage; it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the existing spelling, once mastered, permits access to a far richer range of reading experience than the would-be reformers' sanitised future would allow.

Further, any phonetics-based reform of English spelling would at once run up against the question of *whose* phonetics. Would the new rules be based on English, Scottish, Irish, American or Indian pronunciation? Would final 'r' be written or not? The result could even be to fragment the written language, with different countries adopting different spelling rules in line with their own pronunciation; whereas at present English in its written form, allowing for minor national spelling variations, can be pronounced in a huge variety of accents while remaining effectively the same. A phoneticised orthography could also be a positive disadvantage to the many non-native speakers (e.g. medical students) who learn English primarily so as to read textbooks, and whose comprehension - especially in the case of Romance speakers - could be seriously affected if they were no longer easily able to recognise re-spelt cognates in the written form (e.g. if 'nuclear reactor' were to be re-spelt as

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[41] Honey, 166.

'nyookleea(r?) reeakta(r?)', it would cease to be immediately recognisable by a Spanish physics student as cognate with 'reactor nuclear'). It is true that Portugal, in the wake of its revolution of 1910, successfully introduced a spelling reform (abolishing double consonants, 'th', 'ph' and 'y'); but it is doubtful today whether a major world language such as English, with its vast numbers of native and non-native speakers, could handle a reform of this type without seriously damaging itself. The case for the status quo has been succinctly put by the linguist F.R. Palmer, who wrote in 1975: "Precisely because of the much maligned vagaries of English spelling, the same written text can be used by people with very different kinds of English … Paradoxically, perhaps, one of the greatest assets of the English language is that there is no one-to-one relation between sound and symbol"[42].

It remains the case, of course, that English spelling will go on evolving over time. It is possible that the apostrophe, which many no longer know how to use correctly (as witness the endless confusion over 'its' and 'it's'), could eventually fall into disuse; Martin Cutts, author of the style manual *The Plain English Guide* (1995), warns: "The apostrophe is now so widely misused ... that its eventual death seems inevitable"[43]. This would be infinitely regrettable from the viewpoint of precision ('the boy's parents' is *not* the same thing as 'the boys' parents'); but it may yet happen. All in all, however, the case for wholesale spelling reform is rather slim, not least since its 'radical' proponents - in what can, alas, only be called little-Englander fashion - simply fail to take account of the international dimension of English.

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2.8. Language awareness

A further proposal of John Honey's on standards of usage and correctness concerns the introduction into the school system of education in *language awareness*. This would include the teaching of grammar, but would go beyond that to take in wider aspects of language in society, both inside and outside the English-speaking world. Noting that the ending of grammar teaching created a situation where "school pupils were not given a systematic knowledge of how their language worked", Honey stresses the importance of equipping everyone with "some basic 'meta-language'" and with awareness of the "rules that reflect the realities of educated usage". He also points out that efforts need to be made to make such teaching interesting - "to prevent 'knowledge about language' from being reduced to an unimaginative grind"[44].

I would suggest that, apart from introducing the basic terms and concepts of grammar, such teaching of language awareness could have a large number of other dimensions - the aim being to improve human communication and encourage active citizenship by removing some of the barriers thrown up by misunderstandings over language. The concept of language awareness would include grammar (morphology and syntax) and semantics; it would also embrace aspects of sociolinguistics, including the role of English in today's world and the English teaching industry worldwide (some people scarcely realise that EFL exists as a profession). It would also be highly beneficial to encourage greater empathy with and understanding of non-native speakers: the teacher could explain the distinction between that category and 'foreigners' (after all, Americans are juridically foreigners even if they are native speakers of English), as well as the difference between speakers of English as a foreign

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[42] Palmer, "Language and Languages", 13.
[43] Cutts, *The Plain English Guide*, 89.
[44] Honey, 173, 189, 190.

language and of English as a second language. Awareness of the 'four skills' (understanding, speaking, reading and writing) would help native speakers arrive at a more accurate and balanced picture of a non-native speaker's level of English, from beginners' to advanced, and could also help eliminate the widespread notion that someone's competence in a foreign language can be judged by accent alone.

Language awareness teaching could also ameliorate communication and self-expression through the honing of (native and non-native) speakers' *accuracy*. It could help avoid such absurdities as - in the context of the music business - the widespread use of 'group' for 'solo artist OR group', as in, say, 'The Police, the Clash, Elvis Costello and other groups'. It might seem obvious that Elvis Costello, as a solo artist, cannot possibly be a 'group' (?! - though he can certainly be backed by one, as in 'Elvis Costello and the Attractions') - especially as the industry has in any case devised a technical term, 'act', which exists precisely to cover both categories. Similar considerations apply to the widespread use of 'song' to cover both vocal and instrumental pieces of music (how can anyone 'sing' a purely instrumental composition?), even though, here too, the industry has a term that properly covers both, namely 'track'. However, to grasp points like these requires some conscious awareness of the basic principles of semantics. Grammar, semantics and sociolinguistics can and should all be enlisted in the cause of improving everyone's command of the resources of the language and, therefore, everyone's thinking capacities.

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3. Why the orthodoxy?

Having examined the various positions of the anti-standard English and anti-grammar lobby, as well as John Honey's counter-arguments, I will now go on to consider the question of the origins of the opposition to Standard English and grammar - where is this tendency coming from? Honey himself explains its genesis, at least in Britain, in terms of two factors - Marxism, and an outdated and romanticised notion of 'community'. To take the second first, Honey rather sceptically evokes a certain, eminently British "nostalgia for the solidarities of the pit and the shop-floor and the council estate" - an idealisation of the closed working-class communities of the past that still marks certain sectors of the British left, and has its counterpart on the right in the nostalgia for the supposed organic community of the traditional village (as exemplified in the 'Shire' of the famous fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings*, by the conservative scholar J.R.R. Tolkien). John Honey suggests that, cohesive and supportive as they may be, such closed communities are often overvalued: the downside to that cohesion is a relentless pressure to conformity and a pervasive suspicion of outsiders - as he argues, the contemporary alternative to "enforced solidarity" is to build "kinds of association based on freedom of choice".[45]

On the matter of Marxism, while it is no doubt true that some of Honey's adversaries consider themselves Marxists (or, perhaps, did so until 1989), it may be doubted whether the blame for the anti-grammar and anti-Standard English movement can be laid at the door of Karl Marx himself. Marxism is (or was) a belief-system based on a depth-reading of the economy, politics, and society, and *Capital* was an attempt to expose the "economic law of motion of society"; at no point did Marxism assume that meaning exists only on the surface or that nothing needs explaining, and its epistemological assumptions are thus light-years removed from the crude empiricism of the anti-grammar lobby. Besides, the Trier-born

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[45] ibid., 240.

philosopher was, as is well known, an internationalist, not a romanticiser of closed communities: "workers of the world, unite!" is scarcely a plea for parochialism, and the planetary unity of the proletariat would surely - as Marx's follower Gramsci recognised - have been an impossible goal without a lingua franca. Indeed, the course of history might have been somewhat different had Marx himself written his works in the dialect of his native Moselle region; in reality, as we know, the mid-nineteenth-century revolutionary reached out - astutely and successfully - to a wide audience by writing in standard German (and, indeed, on occasion in standard English!).

To confine the discussion to Britain (the circumstances in the US are rather different, and, as Honey suggests - 240-242 - related to the communalist particularism associated with political correctness and the feminist and minority movements), a number of other factors, not mentioned by Honey, may be adduced to explain the anti-standard crusade. One is native positivism or empiricism: Britain is a country where philosophy is not taught in schools, and the philosophical tradition that does exist tends to privilege the immediate and the factual over 'depth' readings of any kind. The assumption that phenomena are self-evident can be invoked to justify the rejection of grammar, on the grounds that speech-acts are simply 'natural' and 'obvious' and therefore require no explanation.

Another factor, arguably related to the over-idealisation of closed communities, is, quite simply, the little-Englandism which often expresses itself in overt or covert hostility to anything perceived as 'foreign' - a prejudice which has a knock-on effect on perceptions about language in general. Despite the objective fact that the British national stock is the product of successive waves of invasion from mainland Europe, all too many British (especially English) people still insist today on seeing themselves as innately different from something called 'continental Europeans' (as if the peoples of all 48 countries from Finland to Portugal to Armenia were all identical, and all to be defined only by the fact of not being British!). The continued existence of this mindset may be demonstrated by picking up a copy of any British newspaper, any day of the week.

The corollary of the British failure to engage with foreign languages is a failure to comprehend or admit bilingualism *between* languages (whereas, by way of contrast, most educated Dutch people are fluent in both Dutch and English, and, indeed, some Dutch universities now teach their *home* students in English). This in turn makes it difficult for many British people to understand that someone can be bilingual *within* their own language - that is, can be simultaneously competent in both Standard English and dialect. David Crystal, rather surprisingly, makes some rather strange comments in a 1975 article, "Style: The Varieties of English", which suggest that he too may be in part a prisoner of this assumption: "Most people normally do not talk as if they were from a different area, class or time from the one to which they actually belong … on the whole we do *not* vary our regional, social or historical language norms"[46]. He thus seems to exclude or marginalise the possibility that substantial numbers of people might be comfortable with more than one identity and happy to switch between more than one language code. Notably, the very idea of bilingualism-within-a-language or bilectalism is conspicuously absent from the great majority of the anti-standard English quotations assembled by John Honey; where the idea is brought up at all, it is dismissed as undesirable - thus Crowley, writing on the nineteenth-century dialect poet William Barnes, is quoted as "applaud[ing] the boy's resistance to bilectalism"[47].

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[46] Crystal, "Style: the varieties of English", 252.
[47] quoted in Honey, 116.

For the most part, Honey's opponents appear to be projecting the familiar British suspicion of foreign languages (and therefore of bilingualism) on to the internal situation in Britain (thus rejecting bilectalism, or simply failing to conceive of it). By contrast, bilectalism is firmly established in Italy. Italians have no difficulty in switching between dialect and standard Italian in accordance with company and context, and this tendency may even be on the rise. Arturo Tosi states that in 1992 "one survey of language use … based on a selected sample of Italians show[ed] that as many as 90% of people can alternate happily between the national language and their dialect at will", and concludes that "the great innovation in the bilingualism of the new generation is that they can play and mix the two languages constructively and with confidence"[48]. It is most unfortunate that many self-styled radical 'experts' in the sceptred isle seem to lack the spontaneous linguistic awareness of some of their fellow Europeans.

I would further suggest that if an ideological forbear for the anti-Standard-English tendency is to be tracked down on the political left, it is not Karl Marx at all, but the nineteenth-century artist, novelist and social theorist William Morris. In his utopian novel of 1890, *News From Nowhere* - a text which still provides an inspiration to some members of the 'green' movement - Morris imagined a transformed, deindustrialised Britain with no cities, no organised state and virtually no modern technology (even the railways had gone), made up of a collection of small rural communities tied only by informal links. Travel was still practised; but in a country with no laws at all, where all problems were solved by spontaneous mutual aid, it is difficult to see how those travelling in one part of Britain could have been sure of finding the right spare parts for their horse-drawn cart in the event of a breakdown in a different region. In other words, in the sphere of production such a utopia would lack any *standards*. Morris' society implies a return to the days before industrial standardisation, when every town had its own local time - an extreme ruralist utopia that chimes well enough with the assumptions of Honey's opponents, with their sympathy for small, closed communities, and, of course, with their rejection of *standards* in the crucial area of language. The similarities between the 'small-is-beautiful' English rural utopias of Morris on the left and Tolkien on the right are, to say the least, curious: *The Lord of the Rings* culminates with a counter-industrial revolution or 'scouring of the Shire' - the removal of alien factories and the restoration of the old village community. It is also significant that in Morris' novel the narrator, who falls asleep in 1890 to dream he is in the world of 2102, manages to get away with his 'strangeness' by claiming to be *a foreign visitor*: "from far over-sea", "from the outlands", "from over the water". Much has certainly changed in this Britain of the future, but one thing which has not is little-Englandism. This "beautiful and happy country" is an isolated and parochial utopia, all but cut off from "foreign parts"[49]. Standard English has not actually disappeared from Morris' imaginary Britain, but the reader may easily imagine that within a few centuries, if his projection of history were followed, the standard language *would* almost certainly disintegrate into a mosaic of a thousand dialects.

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[48] Tosi, op. cit., 18.
[49] Morris, *News From Nowhere*, 74, 174, 79.

4. Conclusion: English and the Future

In practice, the future development of human potential lies in developing technology, and not in rejecting it in the style of Morris or Tolkien. English has a key role to play here, as the international language of the Internet generation. The difficulties and challenges which arise from this situation are many, and go well beyond the scope of this article. English is of course not the Internet's *language*, as is often mistakenly asserted, but its *lingua franca*: the presence of Web pages in other languages, notably Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, is continuously increasing in both absolute and relative terms, but it remains the case that English is the main language employed by Internet users who wish to communicate outside their own language community. Still, the global network is already proving to be a new and happier Tower of Babel, in which English operates, not as the "one language" and "one speech" of the biblical legend (Genesis 11, 1), but, instead, as the *connecting* language and speech that serves to interlink the messages sent out across the planet. In the new Babel, no deity will be able to "confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (11, 7) - provided that both native and non-native speakers have sufficient mastery of the codes of English to permit clear and unambiguous communication. This is where the study of grammar comes in as a pointer to the future. In the light of this planetary prospect, John Honey is warmly to be congratulated for his courageous and eloquent refutation of a neo-Luddite, narrowly communalist linguistic pseudo-radicalism whose days are now, at long last, surely numbered.

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