

Varieties of English : teaching Englishes, not English

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Introduction

In this brief discussion I consider some differences in the way teachers (and students) approach the teaching (and learning) of English in Japan. In particular, I focus on a change in approach which can be observed between high school and university. This change involves a shift away from the prescriptive approach used in high school teaching towards a more descriptive approach preferred at university. In the latter approach the priority is on describing the language 'as it is'. Crucially, this includes making students aware of the rich and sometimes complex patterns of variation that are typical of the language used by native speakers in the 'real' world. I begin in section 1 by outlining the main differences between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language teaching. I then go on to illustrate the kinds of variation that a descriptive approach attempts to account for : section 2 introduces some examples of regional variation that indicate a speaker's place of origin, while section 3 discusses some examples of social variation that allow hearers to identify the social and personal characteristics of speakers.

1. Prescriptive versus descriptive

At junior and senior high schools in Japan, teachers adopt a prescriptive approach to English language teaching in which students are presented with one 'correct' form of the language which they are expected to follow to the letter. For example, with their knowledge of school English they can distinguish between 'correct' forms such as those in (1a) and 'ungrammatical' forms such

as those in (1b).

- (1) a. *She saw him do it, but she didn't say anything.*
b. **She seen 'im do it but she didn't say nothing.*

The exam system is then designed to test students' knowledge of this prescribed form of English—specifically, its vocabulary and grammar rules. The clear message to students is that, if they follow the prescriptive rules and use the vocabulary they have been taught, they will succeed in producing 'good' English. Without doubt, this approach is ideal for low-level learners because it emphasizes the rule-based nature of language, and also, because it sets them a clear learning goal—they must master the sentence patterns found in written English.

To some extent, teachers at university persevere with the same prescriptive approach, especially in the compulsory classes of general English offered to students for whom English is not their chosen specialty. In the case of English major students, however, the language is sometimes presented to them in a quite different way. After all, these are learners who have opted to study English at a much deeper level and in a more analytical way. This requires teachers to move away from the sort of prescriptive approach that typifies high school English teaching, and instead, to adopt a more descriptive approach in which the language is presented 'as it is'. As the label suggests, the aim of a descriptive approach is to describe how a language is actually used by native speakers in real situations. And what characterises this real-world English above all else is the existence of variation. According to recent thinking, when it comes to real-world English it is no longer appropriate to refer to *the* English language (i.e. a single, unified system shared by all native speakers). Instead, the term *Englishes* (i.e. English in all its different varieties) is becoming widely used as a way of referring to a language which is characterised by variation between different groups of native speakers.

The descriptive approach embraces the idea that language variation is both normal and pervasive : different native speakers have different ways of

expressing the same thoughts. But in contrast to the prescriptive approach, the descriptive approach takes the view that all forms of the language are good ; that is, if a native speaker says it, then it must be correct (at least, correct for that individual native speaker). For adherents of the descriptive approach, there is no such thing as 'bad' or 'ungrammatical' English. For them, different forms of English are just that—different. So from this point of view, (1a) and (1b) are considered equally correct ; their differences arise merely from the fact that different speakers have acquired different rules of grammar and pronunciation, and also different vocabulary. To distinguish between (1a) and (1b), we can say that they belong to different varieties of English. That is, each one is correct according to the rules of a different dialect : (1a) follows the rules of a dialect called 'standard English', which is the dialect taught in Japanese schools, while (1b) follows the rules of 'non-standard English'. Across the world there are millions of native speakers of English who speak non-standard dialects and for whom sentences such as (1b) are perfectly correct.

What, then, is to be gained from taking a descriptive approach to language study? If all varieties of a language are equally correct, then there is no *linguistic* reason to favour one particular variety over another. Each variety includes a complete system of rules and a full vocabulary which are capable of encoding any thought, no matter how complex, that a speaker may wish to express. (Note that the overwhelming preference for teaching Standard English dialects to second-language English learners (e.g. in Japanese high schools) is due in part to its proximity to written English and in part to the higher *social* status or prestige that this variety has acquired.) On this basis, it makes sense for English major students in Japan to be exposed to a descriptive approach to language, from which they can learn about English in all its forms. Their desire is to study the knowledge that native English speakers have about their own native language. And crucially, this knowledge comes in different forms depending on where the speaker comes from and which part of society the speaker belongs to. Variation is natural and interesting, and for English major students at least, it is worthy of serious study.

2. Regional variation

Regional variation refers to language differences based on speakers' place of origin. For many, it is pronunciation (i.e. accent), rather than grammar or vocabulary (i.e. dialect), which gives the strongest clue as to where someone comes from. An accent may identify a speaker's home country (e.g. Irish English, American English) or region (e.g. the southern states of the USA, the south of England) or his/her hometown (e.g. Bristol, somewhere near London). In addition, there are also accents which are neutral, in the sense that they do not identify a speaker's place of origin. For example, Received Pronunciation or RP is the standard, neutral accent of British English which can be heard in all parts of the UK. It does not carry any regional information about its speakers (although it does carry social information—see below). Nevertheless RP is still viewed as an accent, since an accent is simply a system of pronunciation. In fact, everyone has an accent of some sort (e.g. RP, a regional accent, General American) because everyone pronounces their native language.

English writers have always been interested in regional accents. For example, the nineteenth century British writer Charles Dickens often gave his characters accents, which he attempted to transcribe in the text using unconventional spellings. He did this in the belief that an accent could match or emphasize a character's personality—an acknowledgement that particular accents were associated with particular groups of speakers. About a century ago George Bernard Shaw also took up the idea of the relation between speakers and accents in his stage play *Pygmalion*, which was later turned into the film musical *My Fair Lady*. The play's main character was a professor of English phonetics who claimed, "I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets." (*Pygmalion*, 1913). Of course, Shaw's character was exaggerating the point for comic effect, but nevertheless the point was (and still is) a valid one, that a speaker's accent discloses information about his or her regional identity.

Regional language variation involves dialect differences too, where 'dia-

lect' refers to any aspect of language other than pronunciation, such as spelling, grammar and vocabulary. For instance, most English learners have come across spelling differences between different regional varieties of English. Some well-known cases are given in (2).

- (2) British English : *colour, catalogue, centre, analyse, to practise, tyre, fulfil*...
 American English : *color, catalog, center, analyze, to practice, tire, fulfill*...

Vocabulary differences are also very common between dialects. In (3) some example words in British English are compared with their equivalents in Australian English.

(3) British English		Australian English	
<i>afternoon</i>	<i>Christmas</i>	<i>arvo</i>	<i>Chrissie</i>
<i>mosquito</i>	<i>kangaroo</i>	<i>mozzie</i>	<i>roo</i>
<i>teacher</i>	<i>food</i>	<i>chalkie</i>	<i>tucker</i>
<i>information</i>	<i>idiot</i>	<i>oil</i>	<i>dill</i>
<i>It's fine!</i>	<i>Well done!</i>	<i>She's apples!</i>	<i>Good on ya!</i>

Note that, for most Australian English speakers, the forms in the British English list are also familiar and may be used in more formal styles of speaking. By contrast, the Australian English forms belong to more informal styles, with some of them bordering on slang. Nevertheless they are unequivocally associated with a specific region (i.e. Australia) and they therefore provide a good illustration of a genuine dialect (vocabulary) difference.

Non-native speakers of English sometimes find it surprising to learn that regional variation can also involve grammar differences. One example comes from British English, where we see variation in the use of the *-s* ending on the he/she/it form of present tense verbs. Standard English is the dialect of English taught in Japanese high schools, so all ESL learners in Japan are required to memorise the pattern in (4a). Yet interestingly, not all native speakers follow this rule. The dialects of Norwich (4b) and Berkshire (4c), both spoken in

the UK, have different patterns.

(4) a. Standard English	b. Norwich	c. Berkshire
<i>I sing_</i>	<i>I sing_</i>	<i>I sings</i>
<i>You sing_</i>	<i>You sing_</i>	<i>You sings</i>
<i>He/she sings</i>	<i>He/she sing_</i>	<i>He/she sings</i>
<i>The girl sings</i>	<i>The girl sing_</i>	<i>The girl sings</i>
<i>We sing_</i>	<i>We sing_</i>	<i>We sings</i>
<i>They sing_</i>	<i>They sing_</i>	<i>They sings</i>

Which grammatical pattern in (4) is correct? A high school teacher in Japan adopting a prescriptive approach to language would say that only (4a) is correct, because only this pattern follows the grammar rules of the model dialect, Standard English. But if we choose to take a descriptive approach to language, in which all varieties are considered equally good (merely different), then we have to admit that (4a-c) are all correct. That is, each one is correct for a different dialect of English. Native speakers in different locations speak different dialects and therefore have different grammar rules (as well as different pronunciations). So for example, if you are a native of Norwich then the form *she sing* is perfectly grammatical for you, because it follows the rules of your native dialect. As discussed in section 2, university-level English major students in Japan should be exposed to a descriptive approach to language learning in order that they might appreciate the nature and the extent of the variation that exists among native speakers of English. Only then can they begin to build an understanding of the knowledge that native speakers have of their own language in its various forms.

3. Social variation

Some scholars have filled entire books with examples of how the use of English varies from place to place. In this paper, however, space is short and we must now leave the topic of regional variation in order to focus instead on

another dimension of inter-speaker differences, namely, social variation. While regional variation helps to identify where a speaker comes from, social variation helps to identify what kind of person he or she is—more precisely, which social groups the speaker belongs to.

Humans instinctively form groups. And we tend to belong to groups in which every member of the group has something in common. Put simply, we prefer to be around other people who are similar to us in some way. Furthermore, because our group membership is part of our personal identity—a reflection of who we are—we instinctively feel the need to show other people which social groups we belong to. There are various ways of doing this : through our behaviour, through our choice of clothes, hobbies and friends, and through the way we speak. To take a simple example, as a teenager your instinct is to show others that you belong to the social group of teenagers. And to express the fact that you are a typical teenager, you make sure to dress like other teenagers, to behave like other teenagers, and importantly, to use the same kind of language as other teenagers. In other words, your use of language gives other people hints about which social groups you identify with and about what sort of person you are.

The social factors that are relevant to language are mostly the ones which create broad divisions within a society, such as age (young, old, teenage, 30s, middle-aged...), gender (male, female), social class (working class, lower-middle class...) and socio-economic status. The goal of those working in the field of sociolinguistics is to explain how social factors such as these are related to the way people use their native language. However, what complicates matters somewhat is the fact that any individual will, at any one time, belong to many different social groups, and his/her language will likely reflect the patterns associated with all those groups. For example, the speech of a 24-year-old professional woman living in an affluent neighbourhood of New York will contain multiple cues which hint at this person's identity : she is a woman, so her language will use the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary that typify female speech ; also, she is in her twenties, so she will use the language style that characterises her age group, and so on.

To illustrate the connection between social factors and language, let us focus on just one of these factors : social class. Although this concept is a difficult one to define, most people in English-speaking societies are (at least subconsciously) aware of social class differences and of how much these impact on language. We can think of different social classes as tiers arranged on a continuum—a vertical scale or hierarchy—on which the higher social groups form the Middle Classes (MC) and the lower groups form the Working Classes (WC).

The relevance of this social scale becomes clear when we observe how the use of certain features of language (e.g. pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) increases as we move up/down the hierarchy. For example, there are aspects of spoken British English that are sensitive to the social status of the speaker, including the pronunciation of orthographic *h*. (Here I ignore words such as *hour*, *honest* and *heir*, which are borrowed from French and which are pronounced with a ‘silent *h*’ by all speakers.) There are words containing *h* in the spelling which are subject to variation : in *hello*, *house*, *behind*, *rehearsal*, etc. some speakers pronounce *h* while others ‘drop’ *h* (i.e. make it silent, unpronounced). And as the following figures indicate, *h*-pronouncers and *h*-droppers are distinguished by their social class. The data in (5) show the percentage of *h*-dropping among speakers in the UK city of Bradford, differentiated by social class.

(5) social class :	upper MC	lower MC	upper WC	middle WC	lower WC
<i>h</i> -drop (%) :	12	28	67	89	93

As we go down the social hierarchy from MC towards WC, there is an increasing tendency to drop *h* : in the highest social groups *h*-dropping is avoided by most speakers (e.g. avoided 88% of the time by members of the upper MC group), while in the lowest social groups *h*-dropping is the norm (e.g. among lower WC speakers *h* is dropped 93% of the time). Notice also that the increase in *h*-dropping is not uniform—there is a noticeable jump between MC (28% in LMC) and WC (67% in UWC), which suggests that *h*-dropping func-

tions as a marker of WC speech. That is, those who feel proud of, and loyal to, their WC background, and who wish to identify themselves as members of that social class, do so by producing spoken English which others associate with WC speakers. This includes not pronouncing *h*.

Similar correlations between language and social class membership are found in other places too. Furthermore, they do not just involve differences (i.e. variation) in pronunciation ; they can also include aspects of grammar. Recall from section 2 that different dialects of English have different ways of using *-s* to mark present tense verbs. In (4) it was shown that speakers in Berkshire attach *-s* to all verb forms (I/we/you/he/they...), while those in Norwich omit *-s* altogether and those who speak Standard English add *-s* only to he/she/it forms. But besides this regional variation, there is also social variation according to social class. In the UK city of Norwich, for example, *s*-dropping (i.e. not adding *s* to he/she/it forms) varies in relation to speakers' social status. Again, *s*-dropping is a feature of language which is avoided by higher social classes but used widely by those in lower social groups. Like *h*-dropping, then, it functions as a marker of social class affiliation.

(6) social class :	upper MC	lower MC	upper WC	lower WC
<i>s</i> -drop (%) :	0	2	79	97

Summary

From the point of view of a descriptive approach to language, *s*-droppers and *s*-pronouncers are (like *h*-droppers and *h*-pronouncers) equally correct, just different. Each belongs to a different social class, and each social class has its own characteristic way of using language ; social variation arises when speakers from different social classes follow the rules of their respective accents/dialects. In the prescriptive approach to language presented to English learners in Japanese high schools, variation of this kind is disregarded. However, it is without question an important aspect of native-speaker knowledge, making it a worthwhile aspect of English study for (at least, English

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major) students in Japanese universities. It is encouraging to find a descriptive approach to English teaching (which incorporates variation) being used in university programs where English is a specialty.