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Language Ideologies and Language Criticism in English

Abstract. Language ideology refers to a set of ideas and beliefs about how to use language, its speakers, and the discursive practices in that language community. This ideology implies a level of consistency in a language and its standardised norms and that any deviation from those norms might be considered 'less than the ideal' (see the foundational article in this volume). In this article, we provide an overview of how the 'ideal' use of the English language has changed over time, and the impact of various socio-cultural events in history on these developments, with a particular focus on pronunciation. We discuss how the almost imaginary concept of a spoken standard emerged in the history of (British) English. A spoken standard labelled *Received Pronunciation* (RP) formed a model that was influenced by social class, geography, and levels of education. The dominance of RP was further reinforced, when it was adopted by the broadcasters at the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) in 1922, at which point it came to be referred to as *BBC-English;* the aim of which was to adopt neutral language use that was easily comprehensible to a broad audience. Factors such as the shift in social class and hegemony of languages as well as advances in technology have all contributed to acceptance of more varieties of English and a discouragement of negative attitudes towards lesser-known accents and dialects or non-standard language use, particularly in contemporary Britain and in the United States of America.

Keywords
ideology, Received Pronunciation, language purity, discrimination, varieties of English, native speaker

General

While no two language speakers sound quite the same, there are some features which are associated with being the 'correct' or 'ideal' way to use language as opposed to others, despite how frequently they are utilised in a language community. Lippi-Green (1997: 64) defines language ideology as "a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogeneous language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which has as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the

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spoken language of the upper middle class". This almost directly contradicts the very nature of language and how there is a degree of variation even within standard languages such as English, German, or Spanish. This idealised view portrays language as a rigid set of rules that people have to adhere to in order to communicate efficiently and correctly. It is, however, modelled after a certain group of speakers belonging to a specific social class, cultural background, or ethnicity who seemingly are associated with this standard for other language communities. Standard language ideology, one of the most predominant types of language ideologies is

> [...] the belief that a language has fixed, easily identifiable forms with a clear delineation between 'standard' and 'non-standard'. The 'standardised form' is constructed by and associated with powerful social groups (western; literate; white; male; middle-upper class), who manage access to opportunities such as employment and education, using standardised language benchmarks as a gatekeeping mechanism. A material consequence of the standard language ideology is that non-standardised forms get subordinated through being constructed as 'deviant' and 'non-compliant', leading to the stratification of language varieties. (Cushing 2021: 322f.)

Language is not studied in isolation as a social practice but rather it is considered within the broader social, cultural, and political context of how it is used, by whom, and how this shapes the cultural values of a speech community. Irvine (2012: n.p.) states that

> [t]o study language ideologies, then, is to explore the nexus of language, culture, and politics. It is to examine how people construe language's role in a social and cultural world, and how their construals are socially positioned. Those construals include the ways people conceive of language itself, as well as what they understand by the particular languages and ways of speaking that are within their purview. Language ideologies are inherently plural: because they are positioned, there is always another position—another perspective from which the world of discursive practice is differently viewed. Their positioning makes language ideologies always partial, in that they can never encompass all possible views—but also partial in that they are at play in the sphere of interested human social action.

A crucial point is how difficult it is to pinpoint how ideology is construed. Cavanaugh (2020: 55) points out that while evidence of language ideology is found everywhere on a daily basis, "seeing language ideologies as simply speakers' views of language evacuates the concept of its explanatory power to understand beliefs as part of how systems of power are organized". Language and power are interlinked when it comes to ideologies and how they are formed. More powerful, dominant groups model what type of language use should be considered the norm. Irvine and Gal (2000) claim that language ideologies function via three processes: *iconisation,* whereby "[l]inguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them" (37); *fractal recursivity,* which involves "projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (38); and *erasure,* a process in which ideology "renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible" (38). For example, when many people refer to a 'British accent' they tend to think of indexical features associated with RP more commonly than, for example, Glaswegian or Scouse, also leading to erasure of language varieties, registers, and accents in parts of Great Britain found outside London and southeast England. When determining features of ideologies, Woolard (2020: 2) claims they are

> [...] morally and politically loaded because implicitly or explicitly they represent not only how language is, but how it ought to be. They endow some linguistic features or varieties with greater value than others, for some circumstances and some speakers. Language ideology can turn some participants' practices into symbolic capital that brings social and economic rewards and underpins social domination [...].

Ideologies are a by-product of a person's upbringing, cultural environment, education, and how they have been socialised. Due to a tribal mentality, people may develop ideologies similar to people in their environment. Institutions they have direct or indirect contact with also influence their way of thinking about how language should be used.

Historical

Language ideologies are a set of beliefs concerning the 'right' or 'correct' way of using a language and are therefore frequently correlated with the process of standardisation and prescriptivism. In the late Middle Ages, the spread of the English language to areas previously dominated by educated languages such as Latin, caused the initiation of its standardisation process (cf. Nevalainen/Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2012) and led to the growing importance of English as a vernacular in a number of domains reserved to Latin before.

This development also led to an evaluation of the state of the English language, beginning in the 16th century. The first grammars of English, rather than Latin, emerged, such as Bullokar's *Brief Grammar of English* (1586) or Coote's *The English Schoole-Maister* (1596). Being the first grammars of English written in English, they mark a shift to considering English in its own regard. However, the influence of Latin grammar weighs heavy in their structure and even categorisation of for instance parts of speech. In 1633, Charles Butler wrote: "[t]he Directions therefore, being thus uncertain for the English, leave we them to the Latin, whose they are: & let this one rule serve us for all" (31). Throughout the centuries, grammars have transported linguistic ideologies, e.g. by adhering to the 'superior' Latinate traditions or later by declaring which authorities should be followed with regards to grammar. Michael claims that "[t]he influence of Latin pervades every aspect of the English grammars" (Michael 2012: 318) and that this influence "affected methods as well as materials" (Michael 2012: 319). Until the 18th century, the majority of educators persisted in structuring their English grammar lessons according to the categorical framework and methods employed for Latin (cf. ibid.).

In order to describe how in the history of English both changing as well as repetitive patterns of language ideologies can be highlighted, we use pronunciation as an example of how it has been an issue of consideration to preserve, install, as well as question certain ideologies. Pronunciation has often been perceived as a marker of belonging to a certain social class, geographical region, or level of education leading to prejudice, stigmatisation, and considering some pronunciations more prestigious than others (cf. Mugglestone 2007). However, contemporary debates about what constitutes 'proper' pronunciation have a long history. While there

was not yet the idea of a 'standard' pronunciation, ideologies repeatedly emerged as to which variety was more preferable or 'prestigious'. These were typically related to educational or social status and throughout the centuries a pattern of using the court or later the monarchy as a point of reference can be observed. The 17th century, but especially the 18th, experienced the rise of the middle class due to what is termed the urban renaissance as well as the Industrial Revolution (cf. Pouillon 2018: 107). Rapid growth of cities and economic success led to social mobility, which in turn led to a desire for instruction in the eloquent and educated language used by the upper classes, including how to pronounce words and sentences. A rise of prescriptivism followed, not only regarding grammar and spelling, but also pronunciation (cf. Longmore 2005: 286). Jones (2006) has discussed attitudes to English pronunciation standards and orthographic reform in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first pronouncing dictionaries were published in the early 18th century (cf. Pouillon 2018: 106). Language instruction was targeted towards socially mobile Britons, making way for a new profession of "orthoepists" – orthoepy meaning "speaking correctly" (Mugglestone 2008: 243) – who focused on teaching the "genteel" or "court pronunciation" (Longmore 2005: 288).

While the focus of 'educated' and 'correct' pronunciation was still on the British upper classes in the late 18th and 19th centuries, a regional component eventually came to be added. The dialect of the south-eastern region, or more specially in and around London, was considered to have most social prestige. The capital city radiated economic power, which was transmitted to its regional pronunciation. This evolving standard came to be known as *Received Pronunciation* (RP) and became the standard to be taught in schools and universities in the 19th century. The relationship between language practices and social status was highlighted by the way that RP was not only popularised but also institutionalised as a sign of social standing and educational achievement through the school system (cf. Agha 2003).

The impact of RP was far-reaching, and even in America it was the standard up to around 1930 (cf. Simpson 1986: 13). However, already in the mid-19th century the state of a standard American pronunciation was controversial. Most famously, in the so-called *Dictionary Wars* (cf. Martin 2019), Noah Webster and Joseph Emerson Worcester took up opposing views in their dictionaries of the English language. While Webster was

in favour of a national standard of the 'common' people of America, Worcester believed in the authority of the educated and upper-class society (cf. Martin 2019: 184). What followed was a standard, that deliberately distanced itself from the focus on social status and elitism that was observed in European monarchies at the time (cf. Milroy/Milroy 2002: 158; McIntyre 2020: 73). However, slavery and the Civil War instead "shaped a language ideology focused on racial discrimination" (Milroy/Milroy 2002: 160).

Present

A multiplicity of historical, cultural, and economic factors such as globalisation, the Industrial Revolution, and the British colonial expansion from the 17th century onwards, have contributed to the status of English as the lingua franca, i.e. the language chosen for communication amongst speakers with different first languages (cf. Seidlhofer 2005). A good overview of this process can be found in Crystal (2003). Although English has become one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world, there are many varieties of English being used in various parts of the world and even within language communities that are geographically in close proximity to one another. To some, this poses the question of what is the 'ideal variety of English' and whether there is such a concept at all particularly given the emergence of postcolonial varieties across the globe (cf. Schneider 2007). The highly educated or dominant linguistic groups may attempt to minimise variation and set norms as a way of maintaining a position of power in the social hierarchy where others adhere to their model of linguistic use. However, due to the vast array of 'native English speakers' the homogeneity of this concept is not representative of actual discourse in everyday life.

A broad categorisation of English might for instance be *General American English* (GenAm) which encompasses regional varieties from the entire United States ranging from Texan *Twang* to the Eastern New England Boston accent, and many others. While these and many other regional varieties can differ not merely in terms of the sound system (*cot-caught* merger) and vocabulary (*soda* vs. *pop* vs. *coke*) they can also follow different grammatical rules (for instance the habitual *be* in *African American*

Vernacular English). The complex heterogeneity that falls under the umbrella term *British English* (BrEng) includes regional dialects and accents such as *Scouse, Cockney, Geordie, Brummie,* not to mention diverse Northern Irish and Scottish varieties e.g. *Glaswegian.* This is not even taking into account other regions where English is considered to be the primary language, i.e. Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and parts of Canada. The list of countries where English is an official language is even longer.

Kachru (1985) developed a model of three circles to illustrate World Englishes, where the inner circle refers to English as the native language of the vast majority of people. In the outer circle English is not the primary native tongue but is used as means of communication between different language groups, and in the expanding circle English has no official or historical role but is used by a large population of people and relies on the standard set by the native speakers in the inner circle. Schneider's (2003; 2007) *Dynamic Model* of postcolonial Englishes shows how language evolves and claims that speech communities typically undergo five consecutive phases in this process, namely foundation, exonormative stabilisation, nativisation, endonormative stabilisation, and differentiation. Each phase is defined by sociopolitical background and historical events, identity construction, sociolinguistic determinants of contact setting, and structural effects that emerge.

There are many different types of native speakers and numerous people from all over the world are able to achieve extremely high levels of proficiency in English, and yet a native speaker ideology associated with certain language varieties persists. This is particularly the case in education with BrEng and GenAm being the two most dominant varieties taught to second language learners. With English as the lingua franca, there is still a certain mystique surrounding the native speaker and the prestige of certain types of dialects over others. There are an increasing number of resources on sounding like a native speaker, such as *Native English: Quickly Learn How to Speak English Like a Native* (Vargas 2016), *Talk English: The Secret to Speak English Like a Native in 6 Months for Busy People* (Xiao 2016), or *Get Rid of Your Accent: The English Pronunciation and Speech Training Manual* (James/Smith 2006) as well as countless websites, and videos from people with many different backgrounds providing input on how to adhere to a certain standard while failing to consider that native speakers do not produce language in a homogenous way. Moreover,

the *monolingual bias,* which views people who are proficient in one language as the prototype and multilinguals as exceptions to a norm, is being questioned leading to a decrease in multilingual discrimination and changes in pedagogical practices (cf. Barratt 2018). Straubhaar (2020) compared teaching practices for standardised assessment and real-world language needs of language learners and found that language teachers in one school used a strict English-only policy and therefore adhered to an ideology where English was the standard (cf. Silverstein 1979; 1996). The language ideology that develops is inherently linked with the language user's cultural background, education, and socio-political environment. Woolard (1998: 27) claims that language ideologies "connect discourse with lived experiences".

Kircher/Fox (2019) carried out a corpus study on standard language ideology linked to the multiethnolect *Multicultural London English* (MLE). They found that non-MLE speakers hold negative social stereotypes of multiethnolect speakers whereas the MLE speakers do not negatively stereotype speakers on their own group. MacSwan (2020) investigated policy and Academic English within the context of standard language ideology and argued that schools should aim to include students with a more diverse language background. A debate of the Speak Good English Movement – which aimed for Singaporeans to use a standard English form rather than the local Singlish variety – raised awareness on the diversity of English and participants critically reflected on standard language ideology (cf. Rose/Galloway 2017).

Linguistic ideology is also linked to language purism in order to preserve its linguistic forms. One example is by eliminating discursive practices such as translanguaging and lexical borrowing which include blending vocabulary, phonology, and grammatical structure from multiple socially distinct languages. In English-dominant classrooms, monolingual language ideology is the norm and this creates a social hierarchy of languages (cf. Martin/Aponte/García 2020). However, some scholars are challenging this ideology and encouraging the idea of multilingual discourse in the classroom where one language is not considered to be more prestigious than another (cf. Rowe 2018; McClain/Schrodt 2021). Despite the fact that the majority of the world is multilingual and there are some highly diverse language communities, there is a persisting language ideology that view monolingualism as the norm (cf. Silverstein 1996; Shin 2017;

Adhikari/Poudel 2023). This could even be rather dangerous since it marginalises certain groups of people who might speak a minority language while others maintain power resulting in language inequality (cf. Heller/McElhinny 2017; Fuller 2018).

Users of one English variety are perceived to be more prestigious and intelligent than others. Due to this type of accent bias, RP continues to be closely associated with "articulate, precise diction" (Watt/Levon/Ilbury 2023: 39) and regarded as spoken by people with high levels of education in opposition to sociocultural stereotypes associated with people using other accents and dialects such as Cockney (cf. Mugglestone 2007). When the BBC was established in the early 20th century, the broadcaster needed to use what was considered to be the most neutral way of speaking understood by the widest possible audience, and detached from regional features. For decades, the BBC required its newsreaders and announcers to use a conservative or upper-class variation of RP (cf. Crystal 2004; Watt/Levon/Ilbury 2023). This, in turn has left many people to associate RP with the ideal way of using British English, not merely the British public but also foreign learners of English. However, since RP has historically been associated with the British upper class and public schools (cf. Agha 2003) such as Eton College, it represented a small social minority which created an ideology of the most prestigious way of speaking English. More recently, there has been criticism of RP being considered as elitist and not inclusive with the changing demographics in the UK making it less representative of the public and therefore less feasible to use (cf. Mugglestone 2008). Moreover, there has been a growing acceptance of regional varieties as a 'correct' way of using English leading to a trend where the language ideology is more heterogenous. Similarly, 'network American' is often identified as Standard American English, a mainstream accent associated with the levelled dialects of the Northern Midwest (cf. Milroy/Milroy 2002: 150f.). Mugglestone (2017: 159) claims how RP itself is far from monolithic and that the "[i]deological and well-established associations of RP with 'correctness' could, however, already lead to attitudinal resistance to certain features which were nevertheless also characteristic markers of its use". Rataj (2021) discusses the notion of the ideological construct in the case of RP by analysing Margaret Thatcher's pronunciation from a television interview along with portrayals by two actresses in film.

Another common reference to RP is *the Queen's English.* Nevertheless, linguists are aware that even the Queen's own use of language has shifted over the decades since she became sovereign. Cushing (2021) considers the role of ideology on academic policy and illustrates an example from a school where children are encouraged to use language in the same manner that the Queen does. He explains that

> [i]t is unclear how a policy which encourages children to 'say it like the Queen' would also acknowledge that their own dialect is of 'prime importance', and so teachers here must deal with contradictory and assimilationist messages about language. (Cushing 2021: 329)

With the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth II and the ascension of King Charles III to the throne, it may be anticipated that the 'ideal' use of language will now be known as *the King's English,* as has historically been the case during the reigns of previous kings. This tradition prompts the question whether mimicking the way the King uses language will be considered as the ideal linguistic practice.

To conclude, we find that embracing the varieties of English shapes new ideologies about language use. Challenging the monolingual ideology, allows a more comprehensive understanding of L2 learning and the impact of perceiving and assessing multilinguals according to the monolingual norm. Moreover, even standard forms of British English pronunciation such as RP have come under scrutiny with more regional varieties being accepted by networks and the public to portray the broad diversity in Britain today.

Discussions on the prescriptivism/descriptivism dichotomy and its various applications to language has been the topic of the Beal/Lukač/Straaijer (2023) handbook where authors such as Cameron outline their ideas such as Verbal Hygiene (Cameron 2012; 2023) i.e., how people attempt to polish language use to adhere to an ideal, or accent bias (cf. Watt/Levon/Ilbury 2023), and standards with pluricentric languages (cf. Hickey 2023). These views are shaping the discourse around language ideology dynamic, ever-changing, and incredibly versatile thus notoriously difficult to pin down.

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