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SCREENING MODERN ENGLISH AT THE TOUCHSTONE OF STANDARD ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

English language is the off-spring of the West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family that is spoken by some two billion persons. Standard English of an English-speaking country as a minority variety (identified chiefly by its vocabulary, grammar, and orthography) carries most prestige and is most widely understood. On the other hand, where Modern English is analytic, the Proto-Indo-European, the ancestral tongue of most of the modern European languages was synthetic, or inflected. The present paper shall essay to justify that the Modern English has successfully broken the rigid boundaries of the Standard English and testifies itself to be a more suitable alternative than the Standard English in modern times.

Key Words: Standard English, SE, Modern English, Touchstone

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INTRODUCTION

English language is the off-spring of the West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family that is closely related to Frisian, German, and Dutch languages. English originated in England and is now widely spoken on six continents. It is the primary language of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various small island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It is also an official language of India, the Philippines, Singapore, and many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa. English is the first choice of foreign language in most other countries of the world, and it is this status that has given it the position of a global lingua franca. It is estimated that a third of the world's population, some two billion persons, now use English.

Written English and Spoken English

There are many grammar books, dictionaries and guides to English usage which describe and give advice on the 'Standard English' that appears in writing. These books are widely used for guidance on what constitutes as Standard English. However, there is often also a tendency to apply these judgments, which are about written English to spoken English. But the norms of spoken and written language are not the same; people don't talk like books even in the most formal situations or contexts. If the written norm can't be referred to describe spoken language, then, the judgments cannot be based on the speech of the "best people," the "educated" or higher social classes. But, the judgment based on the usage of the educated is not without its difficulties. Speakers, even educated ones, use a variety of different forms.

Origins of English and basic characteristics

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and is therefore related to most other languages spoken in Europe and Western Asia from Iceland to India. The parent tongue, called Proto-Indo-European, was spoken about 5,000 years ago by nomads believed to have roamed the Southeast European plains. Germanic, one of the language groups descended from this ancestral speech, is usually divided by scholars into three regional groups: East, North and West. Though closely related to English, German remains far more conservative than English as far as the retention of a fairly elaborate system of inflections is concerned.

Standard English

In the entry for "Standard English" in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992), Tom McArthur observes that this "widely used term . . . resists easy definition but is used as if most educated people nonetheless know precisely what it refers to." For some of those people, Standard English (SE) is a synonym for *good* or *correct* English usage. Others use the term to refer to a specific geographical dialect of English or a dialect favored by the most powerful and prestigious social group. Some linguists argue that there really is *no* single standard of English. It may be revealing to examine some of the presumptions that lie behind these various interpretations. The following comments--from linguists, lexicographers, grammarians, and journalists--are offered in the spirit of fostering discussion rather than resolving all the many complex issues that surround the term "Standard English."

What Is Standard English?

Standard English alias **SE** is a highly elastic and variable term. What counts as Standard English will depend on both the locality and the particular varieties that Standard English is being contrasted with. A form that is considered standard in one region may be non-standard in another, and a form that is standard by contrast with one variety (for example the language of inner-city African Americans) may be considered non-standard by contrast with the usage of middle-class professionals. No matter how it is

interpreted, however, Standard English in this sense shouldn't be regarded as being necessarily correct or unexceptionable, since it will include many kinds of language that could be faulted on various grounds, like the language of corporate memos and television advertisements or the conversations of middle-class high-school students. Thus while the term can serve a useful descriptive purpose providing the context makes its meaning clear, it shouldn't be construed as conferring any absolute positive evaluation.

Definition of SE

SE is a *variety* of English--a distinctive combination of linguistic features with a particular role to play. From the dozens of definitions of Standard English available in the literature on English, we may extract four essential characteristics.

Characteristics of Standard English

1. The linguistic features of SE are chiefly matters of grammar, vocabulary, and orthography (spelling and punctuation). It is important to note that SE is not a matter of pronunciation.
2. SE is the variety of English which carries most prestige within a country. In the words of one US linguist, SE is "the English used by the powerful."
3. The prestige attached to SE is recognized by adult members of the community, and this motivates them to recommend SE as a desirable educational target.
4. Although SE is widely understood, it is not widely produced. Only a minority of people within a country actually use it when they talk. Similarly, when they write--itself a minority activity--the consistent use of SE is required only in certain tasks (such as a letter to a newspaper, but not necessarily to a close friend). Actually, more than anywhere else, SE is to be found in print.

On this basis, we may define the Standard English of an English-speaking country as a minority variety (identified chiefly by its vocabulary, grammar, and orthography) carries most prestige and is most widely understood.

MODERN ENGLISH

Modern English is analytic (i.e., relatively uninflected), whereas Proto-Indo-European, the ancestral tongue of most of the modern European languages (e.g., German, French, Russian, Greek), was synthetic, or inflected. During the course of thousands of years, English words have been slowly simplified from the inflected variable forms found in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Russian, and German, toward invariable forms, as in Chinese and Vietnamese. The German and Chinese words for the noun "man" are exemplary. German has five forms: *Mann*, *Mannes*, *Manne*, *Männer*, and *Männern*. Chinese has one form: *ren*. English stands in between, with four forms: *man*, *man's*, *men*, *men's*. In English, only nouns, pronouns (as in *he*, *him*, *his*), adjectives (as in *big*, *bigger*, *biggest*), and verbs are inflected. English is the only European language to employ uninflected adjectives e.g. *the tall man*, *the tall woman*, compared to Spanish *el hombre alto* and *la mujer alta*. As for verbs, if the Modern English word *ride* is compared with the corresponding words in Old English and Modern German, it will be found that English now has only 5 forms (*ride*, *rides*, *rode*, *riding*, *ridden*), whereas Old English *ridan* had 13, and Modern German *reiten* has 16. In addition to this simplicity of inflections, English has two other basic characteristics:

Flexibility of function and openness of vocabulary.

Characteristics of Modern English

Learning a foreign language is liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupil's curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world. Modern English possesses not a few characteristics of great interest from a psychological as well as from a merely philological point of view. This is especially true, if one considers the possible culmination of our mother-tongue as the world-language. For some of these traits are the very ones which seem fitted to enable English to survive in that role, connected with flexibility; correspondence with thought instead of subordination of it to grammatical categories and merely formal canons; power over words unknown to other tongues, absence of fear of hybrids and certain

other misgivings of the "purists" and pedants. But a few of these important qualities of modern English can be considered here.

1. **Foreign Words**— The free adoption of foreign terms of all kinds is one of the most striking evidences of the real vitality and essential cosmopolitanism of modern English. Its vocabulary always has "the open door." It admits on the same conditions a word from Ojibwa, Greek, Latin or Polynesian. If the right word turns up at the right time, there is no academy to pass judgment upon it, grammatically or lexicographically. The sole authority to welcome or to reject is the genius of the language itself.

Tammany and *telephone*, *taboo* and *aeroplane*, all come into our common speech with equal rights to citizenship. English is thus dependent upon no one language, or even set of languages, for vocabulary. It can pick and choose wherever it will; no linguistic market is ever closed to its traffic. No one language, however polished, however important in the past history of the world, however highly esteemed by educators or approved by men of science, can assume the role of a dictator here. The balancing of its draughts upon the classic languages with those upon insignificant or unknown barbarian tongues and dialects is a marked feature of the mother-tongue. Thus Greek gave us *ostracise*, but not the more living *boycott*; we owe to it *democracy*, *oligarch*, *aristocracy*, *tyrant* and *politics*, but we have borrowed from the American Indians *Tammany*, *mug*, and perhaps *caucus*; nor has anthropological science any greater words to conjure with to-day than totem and taboo, the first of which is derived from an Algonquian language of North America, and the second from one of the Polynesian dialects.

2. **Hybridism**- English has no morbid fear of joining its words together regardless of the remoter origin of the newly-wedded elements. It is a language in possession of those who use it, and not one in perpetual and cringing serfdom to grammarians and lexicographers. It shows its genius in its independence of these linguistic tyrants, being the most untrammelled and democratic tongue ever linked to an advanced and progressive type of human culture.

When the term *sociology* was first introduced, narrow-minded classicists and other would-be guardians of the purity of the language objected that, since it was not composed of two Greek or of two Latin elements, but happened to be made up of one part Latin and one part Greek, it could not be admitted into the vocabulary of modern English. However, had English tolerated no hybrids, we should be without words like *christmas*, *dislike*, *grateful*, *pastime*, *becalm*, *dishearten*, etc. and many more of our common words. Hybridism is no efficient scarecrow for such a tongue as modern English. A fair field and no favor is now the law of survival and entries are welcome from all sources, known or unknown. English possesses some most remarkable hybrids — an example or two must suffice, here.

a. Remacadamizing. — In English one may speak of “**remacadamizing**” the road or, using the word as a noun, of its “remacadamizing.” It is certain that no other language in the world can boast a word of such mixed and varied hybrid.

Remacadamizing resolves itself into the following components:

- 1) **re-** a Latin prefix, signifying “a repetition, or doing over again”;
- 2) **mac-** a Gaelic word for “son,” in common use as a prefix for genealogical purposes;
- 3) **Adam-** the representative in a number of European languages (including Gaelic and English) of the Hebrew name of the first man, according to the Mosaic account of the creation as given in the first book of our Bible;
- 4) **-iz (or -ize)-** the modern English representative, through French of the Greek verbal terminal -t^hetv;
- 5) **-ing-** the English suffix of the participle present, verbal noun, etc.

The word **Remacadamizing** thus represents five languages: Latin, Gaelic, Hebrew, Greek and English.

b. Macadam -The “root” {macadam} of this word exhibits also in another way the vitality of our English speech and its ability to draft new words into its vocabulary, whenever the need arises. The term

macadam is really the family name of the man, John Macadam, who, in 1819, devised the well-known method of paving roads with small broken stones, etc. Celtic and Semitic had already combined to produce **Macadam**, “son of Adam,” which the English language then took up and further molded to suit its genius.

3. Prefix and Suffix— There exist in the world languages that use prefixes only, others that know only suffixes; and there are also many that employ both these morphological devices. Few, like modern English, are free to use the very same particle as both prefix and suffix. And it is one of the complaints of foreigners that expressions of the type of “*set up*” and “*up set*” are often very far from being identical in meaning — indeed, may have no kinship in signification whatever. But this fact is a character of strength rather than of weakness, in a language such as ours. We can say: *overalls and allover*; *overdo and do over*; *overpay and pay over*; *overtake and take over*; *overwork and work over*; etc. A study of the meanings of the words just cited will demonstrate that English has still a fertile field in this direction. It has been pointed out by a popular monthly that *uphold and hold up* (in the colloquial sense of robbing on the highway) are just about opposite in their significations. A similar perversity of meaning attaches to the suffix use in such expressions, in colloquial use, *as take in, do up*, and some others. Nevertheless, such flexibility lends the language a powerful advantage over all other modern or ancient forms of speech. In English, too, a prefix or a suffix can, upon occasion, become an independent word. Thus we may speak of “*isms*” and “*ologies*”; and of “*ana*” derived from the termination of Shakespearian English.

4. “Reduced” Words or Backformation — Another noteworthy characteristic of modern English is its capacity to “reduce” words of inordinate or unnecessary length; a method well-known as Backformation. The “back-formations” of Dr. Murray, the English lexicographer, cited by Jespersen as one of the means the language employs for the purpose of forming new words “by subtracting something from old ones,” belong under the head of *reduction*. “The **phone** and **bike** of the street to-day are kin of the

dictionary terms **cab** (for French cabriolet) and **mob** (for Latin mobile vulgiis), **bus** (for omnibus), etc. The America usage of **Jap** for Japanese, seems common to news, paperdom and occurs sometimes elsewhere. Slang and the special jargons of classes, professions, etc., of course, count such "backformed" words by the score. One place where the process is clearly seen at work is in the case of words and place-names adopted from American Indian languages. Thus, if Dr. J. H. Trumbull be right, the Algonkian toboggan has, by way of Tom **pung**, produced pung, the name of a well-known vehicle in New England; and the Indian Quaquanantuck in Long Island has been "reduced" to **Quag**; Sagaponack to **Sag**, etc. **Cisco or sisco**, which is all that is left of the Ojibwa name of this fish of the Great Lakes, **longe, or lunge**, etc. In most of these cases the Backformation has occurred at the beginning of the original word. It sometimes has happened that in one part of the country the first part of an Indian word has survived in "backformation," and in another the last.

Discussion

On the basis of the above discussions, a comparative analysis might help to testify whether the Modern English is fit to be referred as the Standard English or not. This could be done with the help of a comparative analysis between the **Standard English** and the **Modern English**.

Comparative Analysis

Standard English	Modern English
Standard English does not delimit itself to pronunciation only.	Similarly, Modern English too does not delimit itself to pronunciation only.
Standard English is used by minority of powerful people solely.	However, Modern English is spoken by more than a billion people to at least a basic level. After combining native and non-native speakers, it is probably the most commonly

	Spoken language in the world. Approximately, 359 million people speak Modern English as their <u>first language</u> .
Standard English was formed and used majorly with an Educational target.	The target of Modern English could be liberation from insularity and providing an opening to other cultures; foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world; enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing; provide opportunities for them to communicate for practical purposes; learn new ways of thinking and read great literature in the original language; provide the foundation for learning further languages; equipping pupils to study and work in other countries.

Interpretation: A comparative analysis between the Standard English and the Modern English specifies that out of the three characteristics of Standard English, only one of the mentioned characteristics testifies that the Modern English can be addressed as the Standard English. The characteristics could be bifurcated into **Similarities** and **differences**.

SIMILARITIES

The Standard English does not delimit itself to the pronunciation solely. Similarly, the Modern English

too goes beyond the aspects of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

DIFFERENCES

1. Standard English is used by minority of powerful people solely. However, Modern English is spoken by more than a billion people speak English to at least a basic level.
2. Standard English was formed and used majorly with an Educational target. On the other hand, the target of Modern English could be liberation from insularity and inter culture communication, fostering curiosity of the pupil, deepening their understanding, cultivating expression of ideas and thoughts in another language, understanding and responding to speakers, in speech and writing, providing opportunities for communication for practical purposes, learning new ways of thinking, reading great literature in the original language, providing the foundation for learning further languages and equipping pupils to study and work in other countries.

CONCLUSION

The above interpretation signifies that while scrutinizing the Modern English on the touchstone of the Standard English, among both the Standard English and the Modern English, except the violation of the principle of Pronunciation, the two out of the three characteristics do not match. The Standard English and Modern English as well do not circumferised itself to speaking only but Listening, Reading and Writing too. However, where on one hand, the Standard English has always been the stock of the elite minority; the Modern English is today the spoken language at the basic language for more than a billion people. Standard English was formed and used majorly with an Educational target. On the other hand, the target of Modern English could be liberation from insularity and inter-culture communication, reading great literature in the original language, providing the foundation for learning further languages, equipping pupils to study and work in other countries and much more. Thus, it can be said that the Modern English has

successfully broken the rigid boundaries of the Standard English and testifies itself to be more suitable than the Standard English in modern times.

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