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## Varieties of English

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All of us want to be thought cultured. This desire is natural, wholesome and human. An essential part of the education of any person is an accurate and refined use of the mother tongue. This must be accepted as part of "being cultured."

Today we cannot be satisfied with an accurate and refined use of the mother tongue. Certainly not in Japan. This great country is no longer an isolated spot on the world map. It is, in a very real sense, part of the world. The continuous flow of tourists, business travelers, exchange of scholars and students, has knit this nation with other nations. How are we able to interchange thoughts and ideas with other people, other nations when communication is limited to the mother tongue?

Speech is the method which man has evolved for making his wants and wishes known. Effective speech spans bridges across continents and oceans. However, effective use of the mother tongue only, does not span bridges, it does not cut the cords of isolation. The mother tongue is not universally understood. Therefore, it is a necessity today to be bilingual.

From infancy to old age, all of us instinctively lean towards

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things we like or want, and we draw back or turn away from things that we dislike. We smile in one way to indicate pleasure, in another to indicate scorn or perhaps shyness; we frown in displeasure or as a manifestation of deep thought. All these gestures and physical expressions are universally understood. Instinctive means of communication, however, are extremely limited, sounds have to be added.

Our ancestors, thousands of years ago, contributed specific ideas to given sounds. We do not know just how or when the sounds and noises began to take the form of words, but it is logical to assume that gradually noises came to be associated with certain feelings or with certain ideas. Given sounds stood for specific ideas and gradually a great many words evolved, each standing for an idea or a group of ideas. This was the beginning of language. In fact that is all language is today, a great many sounds that are intelligible because we have agreed that they shall mean certain things.

This seems very simple, doesn't it? But let us face facts as they are. There is no agreement universally, that certain sounds mean certain things to all people. There is no universal language. We are called upon to acquire a language which is most universally used as a means of communication, in addition to our mother tongue. Probably the most important language today is English.

Now we have come to a very delicate subject. The Eng-

lish language presents many problems. Problems of pronunciation, intonation, meaning of words, varieties of level cannot be dismissed lightly. In whose image shall we shape the English language? The Englishman's stand is that Americans do not speak English at all. The Americans have difficulty in understanding the English and the Australians. In America alone pronunciation and intonation has as many shades as the colors of the rainbow.

Another problem is the change in language. All languages whose histories have been traced show change. Usually language changes are slow, very gradual. However, after an invasion the changes are sudden and sometimes far reaching. Vocabulary tends to vary more rapidly than the basic structure of the language.

English shows many changes during the centuries in which it has been recorded. We speak of *Old English*, about 450-1050, when the Angles, Saxons and Jutes brought to England from their old homes in north-eastern Europe the Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon dialects, which together are known as Old English. About a quarter of the total present English vocabulary goes back to the words of Old English. The modern descendants of Old English words are often changed in meaning and almost always in pronunciation.

The conquest of England by the Norman French in 1066

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coincided with the beginning of *Early Middle English*. The speakers of the Old English in the main became servants. Their language was seldom used in official proceedings and rarely written. The more elevated and abstract Old English words were disregarded and gradually lost. The language of the invaders made headway. In 1362 English was restored as the language of the law courts. Eventhough, the English language was restored to it's rightful place, the traces of the language of the invaders remained. Traces of the French occupation are found in Modern English. In Modern English we have such synonymous words, (one Latin or French, one Old English) as dress-- clothes, aid-- help, cottage- hut, solitary lonely, and so on.

The early printers from 1476 on, felt the need for language uniformity, especially in spelling and choice of word forms. This was the beginning of a "break through" from the *Middle English period* into the *Early Modern English* period, about 1450-- 1700. This is the period of the Shakesperean language. A language most interesting for study purposes, but certainly not used today. Many words from this period have substantial different meaning today.

It was during this period, (1611) that the King James translation of the Bible became a tremendous force for elevated English. Latin was the language of the Church at the beginning of this period. Most books of the learned world were

in Latin, even in America, until less than two centuries ago. More than twenty-five per cent of Modern English words are directly from classical languages.

To illustrate the language changes which have taken place from the Early Modern English period (1450-1700) through the Modern English period, (1700-- ) let me quote from the Bible, two Timothy 3: 15-- 17 in four versions.

1. *From the King James Version, 1611.*

“The Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

2. *From the Revised Standard Version, 1881.*

“The sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work.”

3. *From the J. B. Phillips Modern English Version, 1958.*

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“The holy scriptures, which can open the mind to the salvation which comes through believing in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for resetting the direction of a man’s life and training him in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the man of God and fit him fully for all branches of his work.”

4. *From the New English Translation*, 1961.

“The sacred writings which have power to make you wise and lead you to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind.”

The Bible has been written in Formal English. All four versions represent Formal English. But because the many changes which have taken place on all language levels, such as meanings of words, sentence structure, word phrases, it was essential to translate the Bible in today’s Formal English.

The Modern English period begins about 1700. By 1700 English had become substantially the language we now know and use. However, the very fact that the British Common-

wealth reached the North and South, the East and the West, her language was bound to be influenced by these contacts abroad. We must take note of the fact that during the last two centuries the English vocabulary has been enlarged chiefly from sources abroad, borrowing from India and America and from all peoples touched by British and American traders; and through scientific coinages.

Eventhough the language we speak today is substantially the English of the early 1600, we must again point out that many words have a different meaning in modern English. No one today refers to *can* in the sense of *know*, or *coy* in the sense of *quiet*, or *betrothed* in the sense of fiancée. They are archaic expressions. Some archaic expressions will always survive, such as the *Thou* for God, and *saith* in Divine services.

In the Preface of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible we read:

”Another reason for revision of the King James Version is afforded by changes in the English language.

The problem is presented, not so much by its archaic forms or obsolete words, as by the English words which are still in constant use but now convey different meanings from those which they had in 1611 and in the King James Version.

The King James Version uses the word “let” in the sense of “hinder,” “prevent” to mean “precede,” “allow”

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in the sense of “approve,” “communicate” for “share”,  
“take no thought,” for “be not anxious,”…………etc.  
There are more than three hundred such English words  
which are used in the King James Version in a sense  
substantially different from that which they now con-  
vey.” *The New Testament in Four Versions*, page 13.

In writing there has been, especially in recent years, a  
tendency toward shorter and direct sentences and the para-  
graph has become a more distinct unit. We may conclude  
that English words, constructions and styles show many  
changes during the centuries. One of the fundamental princi-  
ples of linguistics is that this change in language is inevi-  
table. We need to be aware of this inevitableness. We need  
to keep pace with the changes.

The most important point for study in Modern English  
has probably been the different varieties of usage, and differ-  
ent traditions of style, especially Formal, General and Infor-  
mal levels.

There is no definite established system of naming the varie-  
ties of English language levels. Robert Hamilton Moore, in  
*Effective Writing*, Second Edition, speaks of five language  
levels, Formal, Informal, Colloquial, Vulgar, Slang and Cant.  
Please note, Colloquial has no connection with local, and the  
connotation of Vulgar here has no suggestion of crudely inde-  
cent. Vulgar is simply a term which distinguishes one lan-



guage level from the other language level. Cant linguistically, is language peculiar to a trade or a profession. Doctors discussing interesting cases will be unintelligible to an audience not acquainted with medical terminologies. Technical subjects have their own private language. This language is Cant.

Four language levels are defined by Porter G. Perrin in *Writer's Guide and Index*. Perrin speaks of Formal, Informal, General and Nonstandard levels. In the five language levels given by Professor Moore, we find some overlapping of Vulgar and Slang. Perrin discusses the Vulgar and Slang under Nonstandard.

The differences between the various levels of language are chiefly matters of vocabulary. However, in a minor, but very real degree they are also characterized by differences in grammar, sentence patterns, paragraph length and complexity. This has been well described by Professor Perrin :

“The varieties are to be thought of as shading into each other—not as sharply defined and mutually exclusive. A passage might be regarded as Informal, for instance, if it had several conspicuous traits characteristic of that variety even though the greater part of the passage was in General English.

The varieties are characterized by some differences in word forms, in pronunciation, in vocabulary, in grammatical constructions and by the avoidance of certain

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locutions. The chief differences, and the easiest to discuss, are in vocabulary." P. G. Perrin, *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, page 18.

We all realize that certain occasions demand dignified and formal treatment. Church services, a speech by national authorities, all serious subjects, call for formal language. This does not mean that formal language is archaic, pompous, dull or stiff; it need not be. Formal language is the language used for formal occasions. Some of the characteristics of Formal English have been defined by Professor Perrin :

"Formal English is typically found in books and articles of mature interest, intended for circulation among a somewhat restricted group, college teachers and professors, ministers, doctors, lawyers and others of general or specialized intellectual interests. It is found also in addresses and other formal talks and often colors the conversation of people who do a good deal of reading, but it is more characteristic of writing than of speaking."

P. G. Perrin, *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, page 20.

Formal English is serious and dignified. It is conservative in grammar. It makes full use of an extensive vocabulary. Short cuts in sentence structure and contractions are avoided. Periodic sentences and elaborate parallel movement are characteristic of Formal language. The following quotation from

Leane Zugsmith has the typical formal and parallel locutions of the Formal style :

“Although some were shouting like the men and women on the pier, although some were hysterical, like the men and women crowding the plank, although some were dazed,

there was a difference between them and the persons who awaited them.” Leane Zugsmith, *Home is Where You Hang Your Childhood*, page 65.

Formal English, even though it has limited use, often presents important and illuminating ideas worth thinking about. The ability to read Formal English is a requirement for educated people and one of the abilities to be cultivated in college. Our intellectual growth demands its mastery.

While Formal language has a rather limited use, *Informal language* has considerable range, sometimes including a fragment of Formal traits. Less conservative than the Formal, less dignified, it is thoroughly respectable. It is the language of the business world well dressed, but dressed for daily use rather than for formal occasions. Most books, including most textbooks; most lectures, as distinct from formal addresses; all of these are presented in Informal English. This is the language of the educated man for daily action.

When we talk or write to members of our family, to friends and acquaintances, we use English with more freedom than

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when addressing strangers. We use words and phrases characteristic of familiar conversation. This does not mean that Informal English permits careless expressions. The carelessness we sometimes permit ourselves in writing and in speaking is not a legitimate characteristic of Informal English.

Informal English belongs to Standard English. The basis of Standard English is *social*. Its basis has been well presented by Professor Fries in the following quotation :

“On the whole, however, if we ignore the special differences that separate the speech of New England, the South, and the Middle West, we do have in the United States a set of language habits, broadly conceived, in which the major matters of the political, social, economic, educational, religious life of this country are carried on. To these language habits is attached a certain social prestige, for the use of them suggests that one has constant relations with those who are responsible for the important affairs of our communities. It is this set of language habits, derived originally from an older London English, but differentiated from it somewhat by its independent development in this country, which is the “standard” English of the United States. Enough has been said to enforce the point that it is “standard” not because it is any more correct or more beautiful or more capable than other varieties of English; it is “standard” solely

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because it is the particular type of English which is used in the conduct of the important affairs of our people. It is the type of English used by the socially acceptable of most of our communities and insofar as that is true it has become a social or class dialect in the United States.”

C. C. Fries, *American English Grammar*, page 13.

General, Formal and Informal English together make up what is known as Standard English, with the main emphasis on General and Informal English. The use of Standard English in schools and colleges is intended to help young people prepare themselves to take their part in public affairs, to speak and write for educated people, and so to continue or broaden their range of possible social contact.

*General English* presents the great central body of words and constructions of the English language. It has a wide range, shading off into Formal English in one direction and Informal in the other. General English lies close to concrete experiences, referring to things, people, actions and events. It speaks about that which is familiar to a large number of readers. The sentences are relatively short, one or two clauses without interrupting phrases or involved movement. General English is found in good conversations, in discussions, in most talks to general audiences, in writing, we see it in letters, in well edited newspapers and magazines, in books for general circulation.

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of the writer is to represent conversation, as in plays or narrative dialogue, or when his purpose is to represent a free flow of easy thought.

Colloquial English bridges the gap between Standard and Nonstandard English. *Nonstandard English* is language addressed to special, limited groups. It is often peculiar to a locality as well as to the more or less uneducated. It uses "ain't got none," instead of the Colloquial "don't have any," or the Informal "do not have any," or the Formal "have none." It may use "have went," instead of "have gone," "not hardly," instead of "hardly," and so on.

This speech variety is a very real and important part of the English language. The use of it works very well in carrying on the private affairs and occupations of millions of people and is consequently worthy of study and respect. Its avoidance in business, government or literature is due to *social* rather than to *linguistic causes*.

While I was working in New Jersey, I was asked to investigate the financial circumstances of family B. The eldest child in the family was a boy about eleven or twelve years old. There were three children. The oldest boy had not been to school for about six weeks.

Here follows part of the conversation: "..... Freddy, why are you not attending classes anymore?" The answer: "Well Miss., I'll tell you, ..... I ain't got Mam anymore and Dad

got fed up staying with us kids, so, ..... he's off with his buddies every night, drinking his money. I thought somebody has to get eats for brother and sister, so I got me a job... ”

This boy's language was permeated with slang, but he showed a very keen sense of responsibility. He made perfectly clear that his thoughts were set on accepting this responsibility. There was not a trace of hardness or rudeness. His language was perfectly acceptable in the surrounding circumstances.

Nonstandard English is sometimes thought of as language that is rude and hard, but this may not be the case at all. Nonstandard English is colored by localism and colored by the social conditions. It is primarily a spoken language. Its forms appear in many radio and television programs, in plays and in the conversation of stories. Those who are employed in less socially elevated jobs often use the Nonstandard English. College students should avoid Nonstandard practices. Never employ Nonstandard merely to avoid the trouble of finding more exact phrasing. Complex ideas and dignified subjects cannot be discussed adequately in the vocabulary of Nonstandard English.

*Summary:* Good judgement in choosing the variety of English is one of the signs of a practiced and mature writer and speaker. Colloquial may fit in a letter or in a popular newspaper column, but it is out of

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place discussing a serious or elevated subject. Most fiction is General or Informal. Writing or speaking on a technical or professional subject is more likely to be Formal. The language of a worship service and of religious and philosophical discussion is Formal.

The level of language to be used will depend on the subject and the purpose of the paper and on the audience addressed. Select carefully the level that will be appropriate to the occasion and be consistent in language level throughout the occasion.

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