UNIT 4 LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION

Structure

4.0   OBJECTIVES

This unit is designed to help you
-    understand the notions 'standard' and 'varieties'.
-    get an insight into the processes that are involved in standardization
-    appreciate the need for standardization
-    understand the use of standardized language.
-    problematize the notion 'standard' and see what consequences it has for other non-standard forms.
-    develop a critical perspective on standardization and power.

4.1   INTRODUCTION

Have you ever paused to think what is meant by such sentences as: 'This book is written in English' or 'The news bulletin in English follows' or 'My son goes to an English medium school' or 'English is the National Language of England, Australia and the U.S.A.' Such sentences have one very obvious implication that there is a language which is somehow recognised as the English language and that this English language, despite regional, social and historical variation, somehow has one standard form which is used in the book, the news-bulletin, the school and the countries referred to in the above sentences. What is not so obvious, and therefore worthy of further investigation, is how from among so many diverse forms of any given language - say English or Hindi or Chinese - one form comes to be commonly understood to be the standard form. We all know that English is a global language and over the last two centuries or so, it has spread to different parts of the world. Thus, to-day we have British English, American English, Australian English, African English, Indian English, etc. each of which subsumes regional, local, social and individual variation, and each of which also boasts of having some standard form of its own. And yet, over and above all these, we can and do have the notion of a **standard English**. In the following sections of this unit we shall try to understand how such standard languages come into being (i.e. the processes involved), why such standards arise (the motivation behind the processes of standardization) and what purposes such standards serve.

4.2   THE NEED FOR STANDARDIZATION

There has been a sort of consensus among scholars (including sociologists, linguists and educationists) that in view of the seemingly endless variation and diversity in languages, some form of standardization or fixing of norms is essential. It has been argued (though it is still a moot point, and we shall return to it later in this unit) that heterogeneity and diversity is in some ways a hindrance to progress, development and governance. No doubt there are different forms of language — regional dialects, social dialects, and so on — but some form has to be 'fixed' as standard even for purposes of studying and analyzing the structure of the language (the 'grammarians' enterprise) and for using that as reference-point for talking about other dialects or varieties. The creation of (or rather the construction of) a standard form or standard language, it is further argued, brings about unity and uniformity which are essential conditions for development, progress and government.

It has been further argued that people (who are speakers of various dialects) need one standard language both in the spoken and written modes, in order to feel that they are one people. This feeling of oneness, despite dialect differences, makes them feel proud of this single standard language and they begin to share the prestige associated with the standard language. In practical terms, if there is one standard language, it becomes easy for the rulers (leaders) to govern them, legislate for them, lay down the laws of the land, create educational materials, provide literacy and create more and more channels of communication for them. All these arguments, in their essence, mean that some standard form of a language is needed for literacy, education, law and order, governance, inter-regional communication, for creation of discourses in various disciplines and for providing people with an 'identity' of which they can feel proud.

On the face of it, these arguments appear to be totally unexceptionable, but as we go on we shall see that several serious socio-political and psychological implications are contained in these arguments, as well as in the age-old human quest for the creation and support and perpetuation of standard languages. In brief, then, we need a standard language for

a)   creation of scientific descriptions of language,
b)   creation of text books, primers, reference materials,
c)   creation of discourse in various disciplines,
d)   dissemination of knowledge,
e)   education and literary,
f)   a sense of unity and identity,
g)   proper and smooth functioning of law and order,
h)   easy governance
i)   inter-regional and/or international communication.
j)   modernity, stability and development

4.3   THE PROCESS OF STANDARDIZATION

Standardization refers to the process by which a language gets codified in some way. Quite often certain events or items may also be associated with this process. In the case of the standization of English it is customary to mention such things as Wycliffe's translation of the Bible into English, Caxton's establishment of the printing press in England and Dr. Johnson's dictionary of English published in 1755, etc.

Apart from such events or items, linguists and sociolinguists generally agree that the coming into being of a standard language i.e. the process of standardization involves four stages. Einar Haugen (1966) has proposed the following four stages:

(i)   Selection

First of all, one variety of a language has to be selected from amongst the several varieties that are used by speakers of a language. If we look at the process of selection in different ages and places, we shall find that the variety that gets selected is more often than not associated with power. The power may be economic, political, cultural or a combination of two or more of these. It is perhaps reasonable to expect that in any society, the 'elite' - political, economic or cultural - would see to it that the variety of language they use is chosen for standardization. The powerful elite are naturally eager to retain and perpetuate their power and influence and, language being one of the most powerful and versatile instrument of social control, they see to it their own variety gets selected for standardization. It would be an interesting project for those interested to find out how and why a particular variety of English got selected in England at a given point of time, and how and why a particular variety of Hindi got selected for similar purposes in post-independence India. As has been pointed out in another unit, "we need to remind ourselves again and again that the selection ....of a particular variety is not a socially natural and innocent process"

(ii)   Codification

Once a particular variety has been selected, it needs to be codified i.e. the grammatical rules, the norms of pronunciation, the spellings and other writing conventions have to be 'fixed'. This stage of the process of standardization involves the writing of standard grammars, manuals of pronunciations, thesauruses, reference books, dictionaries. Codification and the fixing of norms of usage imply that the forms enshrined in the grammars and other reference books come to be seen as the only 'correct', 'pure', 'elegant' or 'sophisticated' forms. It is the codified standard forms that are then used for creation of text books, reference manuals, learned discourse, legal texts, legislative documents and all other important materials. The media (both the print and electronic media) uses this codified variety, the education system propagates it and the administration and judiciary sustain it. This codified, frozen set of linguistic norms thus comes to be accepted as 'The Correct' standard and becomes the reference point used for treating all other varieties as deviations from the norm, as sub-standard or non-standard. We shall return to this particular point later in this unit.

(ii)   Elaboration of Function

The standard language, once codified, is not expected to be used in informal contexts i.e. in domains such as the family, the neighbourhood or the playfield or in semi-formal interactions between peers, buyer-sellers or across-the-counter situations. However, in formal, public domains this standard language is a must. The most powerful and pervasive use of the standard language is in education. Text-books, learned materials, lectures, seminars, examinations — all these require the use of standard language. Higher education, technical education and scientific education, especially, call for the use of standard language. Government agencies, law and judiciary, bureaucracy, diplomacy, trade and commerce — all these again call for the use of the standard language. As the standard language comes to be used in more and more domains it needs to be expanded in terms of special, technical vocabularies which often requires the creation of new words and new terminologies. Some standard languages meet this requirement by drawing upon classical sources — English, for instance, draws much of its technical/special lexicon from Latin and Greek, while in the case of Hindi, the source is Sanskrit. This often has the effect of making the standard language beyond the reach of the common man,

artificial air and, generally, causing unease and even resentment among the average learners and common masses. Elaboration of function also requires the creation of new styles of discourse (e.g. business English, diplomatic English, etc.) and more formal forms and formats of writing.

iv)   Acceptance

The variety that gets codified and standardized has to gain wide acceptance within the community. The speakers, though belonging to diverse dialect-groups, must come to recognise, accept and cherish it as their 'language'. Sometimes it may so happen that the standardized language is also recognized as the 'national' or 'official' language, thus giving its users a distinct national-linguistic identity. English, in its standardized forms, is the national, official and dominant language in England, the U.S.A. and Australia, Hindi is the 'National official' language in India, while languages like Bangla, Gujrati, Marathi, Kannada and Manipuri are recognized, used and accepted as official languages in their respective states. Acceptance of standardized languages, invests in people distinct regional or national identities and this, in turn, further strengthens the prestige and power of the standard languages.

4.4   THE CONSEQUENCES OF STANDARDIZATION

Standardization brings into being **Standard Language**. Once a standard language has come into being it serves several useful purposes. For the community (social group, region or nation state) it serves as a symbol of distinct, separate identity, as a token of independence. Australians and Americans are rather proud of their nationhood and of their distinct identity, and as a mark of that national pride they proclaim their standard English as Australian or American. Another positive outcome of standardization is that the community or nation-state gets a formalized, uniform linguistic entity (i.e. a standard language) that can open channels of communication between linguistically (dialectally) diverse groups and communities. This is important for people and messages to travel across space, overcoming dialectal differences, and get wider acceptability. In another sense too, the presence of a standard language helps people forget (or at least push below the surface) their dialect differences and forge associations with one another in the name of the standard language.

In practical terms, standardization leads to smoother governance, wider communicability of messages and speedier and easier dissemination of knowledge. Education, especially formal education benefits a great deal from the availability of a standard language which provides a 'pedagogial ideal' to the teachers and pupils. The standard language is what schools teach and it is also the medium through which schools teach. For the learners, being educated becomes synonymous with gaining mastery over th standard language, not only for being able to speak and write in it, but also accessing new knowledges and technologies throught it.

Standardization, furthermore, enable writers, scientists, thinkers to create newer repositories of ideas, thoughts and discoveries in the forms of books, journals and other forms of scholarly discourse. Electronic and print media (especially the latter) use the standard form extensively for news, views and opinions. In fact, one of the chief uses of standard language is the creation of a vast body of written documents, so much so that often standard language becomes synonymous with written language.

On the negative side, standardization acts as **a powerful instrument for the domination of the elite over the masses.** The standard language, because of its all-pervasive use in administration, bureaucracy, law, the professions and, most importantly, in education helps the elite consolidate and perpetuate their power. Though theoretically the standard language and the 'fruits' of standardization are available to all, in actual practice, the vast majority remains outside the sphere of the standard

language, and it is then at their sole discretion that all these 'riches' have to be apportioned among the masses of common people (i.e. speakers of dialects).

Standardization and the concomitant codification of language, it is argued, are aimed at minimizing vagueness and ambiguity. The implication is damning for non-standard varieties - they are full of vagueness and ambiguities and uncertain articulations, and it needs the intervention of well-meaning linguists and language planners to remove, or at least reduce this vagueness and ambiguity through a process of standardization. In order to counter this kind of argument, it has been suggested that standard languages (the result of codification) may be good for formal discourse in spoken and written forms, but they lack **charm** and **earthiness** and a **certain cadence** which the so-called dialects and non-standard varieties **have**

4.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to make you understand the notion of 'standard' and 'dialects'/'varieties'. We have also given you an insight into the processes of standardization, the need for a standard language and the consequences for the non-standard varieties.

4.7   KEY WORDS

standardization	the process of making a variety of language conform to a **standard variety**. This may take place in connection with the writing system or spelling or even pronunciation, and is usually implemented by government authority.
standard language	That particular variety of a language, usually both spoken and written, which is accepted as the norm for educated usage. The standard variety is taught in schools and used for almost all publication; educated speakers speak it in all circumstances, except possibly in speaking to close relatives.
standard English	That particular variety of English which is considered to be appropriate in formal contexts, and which is considered by many educated speakers to be appropriate in all contexts. Acquiring fluency in standard English is a large part of what we consider education. Within limits pronunciation is not considered part of standard English, and standard English may be spoken with almost any kind of regional accent. However, in the written form, standard English is generally the same all over the world.
selection	The first step in standardization: choosing which dialect should be the standard.
codification	'Fixing' conventions/rules (i.e. grammatical rules, norms of pronunciation, spelling and other writing convention) in the process of 'creating' a standard language.

language. Thus, while the presence of a standard language creates a kind of social mandate that in order to move up in terms of socio-economic success, education and professional advancement, one needs the standard language, the institutional and organisational structures are such that a large majority of people are unable to learn and use the standard language. That being so, this vast majority is then perceived as being constituted of speakers of non-standard, sub-standard or mere dialects. In turn they lose out socio-economically and politically and are doomed to stay in positions of powerlessness. Another consequence of standardization is that speakers of dialects or non-standard varieties develop strong negative perceptions of their own varieties and even their own speech communities. These negative perceptions, over a period of time, get fixed in the psyche of individuals and communities and become obstacles in their full and meaningful participation in national/regional enterprises.

4.5 A CRITIQUE OF STANDARDIZATION

Languages have always been standardized and all societies have created standard languages in order to consolidate and sustain their power and to exercise social control. Language standardization and codification has always been seen as a positive human intervention aimed at the 'larger good' of the people. The arguments built up in favour of codification and creation of standards have highlighted the need to bring the masses (representing different dialects/varieties) into the mainstream by making them literate and educating them in and through the standard language. While, on the face of it, it is a laudable aim, the fact remains that in most societies the access to standard language and the knowledge and technologies associated with it have been largely the preserve of the select few — the elite and their cohorts. The masses have, as a result, been made to aspire and struggle and reach out to learn the standard language, but a vast majority has always been denied this access due to social, political and other factors. Those who fail to access the standard language are thus twice-cursed - they do not learn the standard language, and they also begin to attach stigma to their own 'nonstandard forms' or dialects. They desert their mother tongues in their pursuit of the standard languages, which constantly eludes them. These vast numbers of people are then characterized as 'uneducated', 'illiterate', 'uncouth', 'uncultured' (the terms we often come across are jaahil, ganwaar, anparh, etc.) because there is a very convenient myth constructed and floated by the 'elite' that knowledge and wisdom and modernity and progress can come only through the standard language. It is never stated that dialects or non-standard varieties can and do represent knowledges, belief systems, great deal of creativity and insights into life and nature. As a consequence, non-standard varieties get relegated to unimportant margins of life, discourse and scholarly speculation. Consider the following two statements that have been taken from as rather reputable text books on sociolinguistics:

1. "It is probably fair to say that the only kind of variety which would count as 'proper language' is a standard language"
2. "Standard English (e.g. the kind of English used in this book) is not a dialect at all, but a language, whereas the varieties that are not used in formal writing are dialects"

(R.A. Hudson)

One can immediately see from these statements the kind of logic that is inexorably built up by those who create the standard language and who stand to benefit from it the most: standard language is the only 'proper language' and this 'proper language' is the only form that is suitable for 'formal' (read this to mean learned or scholarly or serious) writing. This being the logic, it is small wonder that all the knowledge and learning and culture are appropriated by those who control and use the standard

language, and it is then at their sole discretion that all these 'riches' have to be apportioned among the masses of common people (i.e. speakers of dialects).

Standardization and the concomitant codification of language, it is argued, are aimed at minimizing vagueness and ambiguity. The implication is damning for non-standard varieties - they are full of vagueness and ambiguities and uncertain articulations, and it needs the intervention of well-meaning linguists and language planners to remove, or at least reduce this vagueness and ambiguity through a process of standardization. In order to counter this kind of argument, it has been suggested that standard languages (the result of codification) may be good for formal discourse in spoken and written forms, but they lack **charm and earthiness and a certain cadence** which the so-called dialects and non-standard varieties **have**

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selection	The first step in standardization: choosing which dialect should be the standard.
codification	'Fixing' conventions/rules (i.e. grammatical rules, norms of pronunciation, spelling and other writing convention) in the process of 'creating' a standard language.

elaboration of function	Taking a language which has previously been used only for certain purposes and introducing changes (such as new vocabulary) that will allow it to be used for a much wider range of purposes, such as writing laws, and writing on other academic subjects. This is usually a central part of language planning.
acceptance	The final stage in language planning in which the newly constructed language comes to be generally used by the community.

4.8   QUESTIONS

1.   Which language do you identify with and why? Do you think it is a standard language or a dialect?

2.   Do you agree with the two statements quoted in 4.5 above? Give your arguments.

3.   'Standard language' - the notion suggests that there can only be one standard language and the rest are dialects. Would you agree with this or would you rather maintain that it is possible to have several standards? Consider the case of English and Hindi and answer.

4.   Reflect on the different ways in which dialects and their users can suffer as a result of the hegemony and power of a standard language.

5.   Can there ever be only one 'correct' way of saying/writing things? Take sides and discuss.

4.9   BIBLIOGRAPHY

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