UNIT 2 CONSOLIDATION AND STANDARDISATION OF ENGLISH

Structure

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the last unit we discussed how language varies from person to person and from place to place. We also took a historical look at different kinds of variation and different varieties of English and described their main features with examples. But the question that inevitably comes up is, in spite of rampant variation, how are people able to communicate successfully with each other? In this unit, we shall discuss this question in detail with particular emphasis on the notion of consolidation and standardisation of the English language. We have already touched on the general concept of standardization in Block 6. Do re-read that unit before reading this one.

2.1 BACKGROUND

The answer to the question just raised above is simple. People are able to communicate successfully with each other in spite of rampant variation because of the fact that there is often a *need* to communicate and that one of the varieties or dialects acquires the status of a *standard*. This variety is used for wider communication and enjoys a certain prestige as it is used by the educated, the cultured or the otherwise important sections of the speech community. But the mechanism of standardisation is not very simple. It involves a very complex set of processes that takes a considerable amount of time and the energy of a series of generations. And this is not only true of English but of all languages. But before we enumerate the mechanism of standardisation, let us see what we mean by standard English.

2.2 STANDARD ENGLISH

While trying to define what standard English is, one is bound to encounter questions like: what does one mean by it; is there, in fact, such a thing and is it desirable that there should be a standard. These questions have been debated for long and there are people who disapprove the notion of a 'standard' language because it is inevitably the language of the elite, and because language is inheriently a dynamic, variable entity. How can we, for instance, amidst such diversity and confusion, fix a standard? Whom or what are we to take as our criterion of correctness? Any ruling that we may

lay down will be purely arbitrary. Moreover, isn't it unscientific and against the natural property of language to imagine that it can be fixed?

But these objections do not necessarily dispose off the question of 'standard'. We, while objecting to a **standard English** do not distinguish between **standard English** and **standardised English**. It is true that there is not, and never could be, a standardized English; but there is such a thing as standard English. It is not easy to define, but we all intuitively know what it is, we all realize that it exists, and most of us can recognize it when we hear it. It is not rigid or inflexible. Within its framework there is room for a certain amount of variation. But yet there are certain things which we must not use. For instance, we do not use *childs* as the plural of *child* though historically it is more correct than *children*.

One thing that should be borne in mind while discussing standardisation is, since speech, by its very nature, is less amenable to being fixed than writing, the concept of a standard makes most sense when we refer to the written word. (When we are taught to write, it is the standard language that we are taught!)

2.3 THE PROCESS OF STANDARDISATION

The Standardisation process proceeds in four inter-linked and often over-lapping stages. These stages are applicable not only to the growth of the English standard but also to the growth of standard varieties everywhere. Here we shall discuss only the former. Thus, the four inter-linked stages are:

(a) *Selection* of the east midland dialect as the dominant variety.
(b) The *acceptance* of the functions of the standard
(c) The *elaboration* of the functions of the standard.
(d) *Codification*, that is, the attempt to 'fix' the standard variety in dictionaries and grammars.

Let us discuss these in detail:

(a) Selection of the Standard Variety

The origins of the standard variety of English lie with the merchant class based in London. The dialect they spoke was the East Midland one—associated at first with Norfolk, later with Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Bedfordshire—and already by the14th century this was a class dialect within London. The lower class spoke another dialect, a south-eastern one, the antecedent of Cockney. The dialects were similar in many respects but there were some regular differences; for instance, the merchant would say *mill* with the short */i/* of *pin*, but the tradesman said *mell*, with the */e/* of *pen*. It is crucial to emphasize this linguistic stratification in London, since the subsequent history of the standard variety has much to do with its relationship to the speech of the Londoner in the street.

By the end of the 14th century, East Midland was an embryonic written standard. However, there were variations within the dialect. So, at first we see in use a number of different written standards. After about 1430, however, one of these variants became increasingly dominant because of its use in government and official documents. By the end of that century, the fixing of the selected variety was greatly strengthened, and accelerated, by the printing press.

We cannot yet assume the existence of a standard that is spoken. It took sometime for the East Midland speech of the London merchants to acquire prestige. But there is another reason why East Midland, or variants of it, may have been quite widely

adopted during the later Middle Ages. Students from all over England came together in the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both only a few miles from London. In the triangle formed by these three centres, a great deal of East Midland speech would have been heard, and possibly used as a kind of **Lingua Franca** among a mobile social group. If such a popular dialect existed, it would have helped to spread East Midland, not because of its prestige value, or because it was imposed by the most powerful group but because of its usefulness in communicating with people who spoke another dialect. One of these uses was as a medium for popular culture: in particular the tradition of folk-song, which flourished in the age of standardisation. A survey of the folk songs from 16th century to the present reveals that the linguistic medium for folk-song is one which does not, on the whole, reflect regional differences.

Apart from these regional and socio-economic factors, there is also a political dimension to the question of the selection of the standard variety. As has been seen in France and Spain, in England too, a standard emerged when ideas about **nationhood** and **political autonomy** gained currency.

(b) Acceptance of the Standard

By about the middle of the 15th century, the East Midland dialect had been accepted as a written standard by those who wrote official documents. But its acceptance was not explicit; it was a matter of convention rather than a *diktat*. By the 16th century, the standard variety was well-established in the domain of literature. A comparison between the literary outputs of the Elizabethans with that of the 14th century would reveal a striking difference in language. For instance, Chaucer wrote in a dialect quite different from the dialect in which Langland wrote. There was much regional diversity in terms of vocabulary, grammar especially in the English literature of the 14th century. Thus, while Chaucer wrote in the East Midland dialect as it was spoken in London, he was not yet writing in a *national* literary standard, since his contemporaries had their own, local standards. By Shakespeare's time this regional variation in the language of printed literature had all but disappeared.

Thus, the establishment of a literary standard paved the way for fixing the sense of a linguistic norm. Once the norm had been established, at least in the written language, it became possible to break it for stylistic purposes—in particular, for representing the speech of people from far away regions whose language was supposed to have certain clearly identifiable characteristics. Hence, in the course of the 16th century, the growing sense of a literary norm can be seen by the numerous attempts to represent the speech of foreigners, the linguistic characteristics of Welsh, Scottish, and Irish people, and the speakers of other dialects of English. It is now that we begin to see the stereo-typing of such speakers. Increasingly, they play the role of buffoons or boors. Non-standard speech is equated with simplicity or roughness; and in order to depict those qualities in literature, some form of *marking* for non-standard features is adopted.

Acceptance of the standard, therefore, occasions a rejection of kinds of English that are felt to be outside the norm. Thus, while Chaucer could objectively depict the speech of the people whose dialect was not his own, it was otherwise in the 16th century. For instance, one dialect which was singled out by play-wrights and others as the butt for a cheap laugh was Kentish. We are immediately reminded here of *King Lear* where Edgar speaks in the Kentish dialect to Oswald evoking laughter in the audience.

Such literary practices reflect the growing awareness of a standard variety in the course of the 16th century. By then, attempts were being made to *define* the standard: it had reached the **stage of explicit acceptance.**

But, acceptance by whom? Acceptance by government functionaries and small groups of literary figures is not the same as acceptance by the aristocracy; still less is its acceptance by the vast majority of ordinary people. But by the end of the 16th century, we have an accepted standard, and some prestigious speech forms, that were being promoted consciously and unconsciously by a tiny elite. We do not know, however, the extent to which we can speak of a standard pronunciation at this time, or how widespread that pronunciation was among the aristocracy in general. What we can be sure of is that the prestige of one dialect triggered the disparagement of the others. Kentish is only the first to be stigmatized. In the course of the following centuries, the dialects of other parts of England are labeled variously as 'offensive', 'disgusting', and 'barbarous'.

(c) Elaboration of Function

At this stage, there was an attempt to achieve one of the two major goals of standardisation: **maximal usage in function**. The new standard had to function in the domains of law, government, literature, religion, scholarship and education wherein previously only Latin and French were used. Therefore, the standard had to develop new structures and new meanings, appropriate to its use in different domains. Each group of specialist—lawyers, writers of religious texts , administrators—cultivated their own registers within the standard. Thus, it would be wrong to assume the standard as monolithic. It had to develop variations in register to suit its wide range of functions.

The major source of variation, thus, was no more regional, as different styles developed their own particularities. Often these were influenced by Latin and French usage. For instance, the English of religion and law were greatly influenced by these foreign usage. In all styles, words developed additional technical meanings as they came to be used in certain contexts, and these technical meanings often influenced spoken usage. In short, English vocabulary became differentiated to an extent previously unknown, in that words can be identified as 'literary', or 'legal' or 'technical' in one sphere or another.

Let us look at certain elaboration of the functions of the standard, as it developed in the domains previously associated with French and Latin:

(i) In 1362, English was used for the first time in the domains of both government and law. But now, the use of French in written documents continued until the 18th century and today legal English still employs French and Latin terminology like *fee simple* and h*abeas corpus.*

(ii) Though the use of English as a literary medium was apparent by the end of the 16th century, the acceptance of its potential in this respect was won after a great deal of controversy. There ensued a debate about the suitability of English as a compositional language and while some scholars considered English unsuitable for composing great works of literature as it was 'dull', 'cantered' and 'barbarous', others were of the opinion that there was nothing worth saying that could not be said in English. A compromise view held that English could attain *eloquence* of the classical languages by injecting thousands of Latin loan-words into the language. But by 1580s the controversy had subsided and a balance had been achieved between native usage and foreign importation. English was declared to have achieved a state of eloquence. Moreover, the suitability of English as a literary medium was no more in doubt because poets like Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare had composed works that many felt were a match for any literature. And with this new-found confidence writers were able to conduct stylistic experiments.

(iii) Another important domain where we encounter the power of Anglo-Saxon tradition was that of religion. The 16th century witnessed a flurry of Biblical

translation, and the preparation of prayer books and other Christian texts. This process of vernacularization culminated in the publication of the authorized version of the Bible in 1611. This version furnished English with what might be called a classical variety of its own.

(iv) The crucial stage, it has been suggested, in functional elaboration is the development of a medium for serious, expository prose. Inspired by the example of the Authorized version, writers began to cultivate prose to such an extent that the 17th century has been called the century of prose; and a significant aspect of that trend was the increased use of English writing of a scientific and scholarly nature. Fed by a developing interest in science and philosophy, people wrote political pamphlets, journals, essays, and the first newspapers in English. By the end of the 17th century the range had expanded to imaginative, fictional writing. Such a wide functional range was responsible for the increased used of English which, in turn, enhanced the status of the language.

(v) With the displacement of Latin as the language of scholarship, English gradually became the language of education. Formal education was extended throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. Grammar schools were founded and there was a gradual loosening of the Church's hold on institutions of learning and literacy. The growth of secular education increased the demand for learning of English. Moreover, the Protestant reformation promoted the English language as a medium of religious instruction, further undermining Latin as the language of instruction. But it is wrong to assume that Latin was entirely shown the door. Instead, in the literary and cultural Renaissance of the 16th century, Latin became the object of renewed interest and enthusiasm. But it was the classical Latin, rather than the medieval variety of the Church, that was studied and analyzed. Latin had received a fresh boost, but as a taught language rather than as a medium of learning. Paradoxically, enthusiasm for Latin ultimately furthered the cause of English. It led to massive translations into English, which in turn directed people's minds to the forms and structures of the vernacular (English). Thus, education, for most people, except certain sections of the society, was vernacularized and it was the standard variety of English that became the medium of teaching. In time, however, it was also to become the form of English taught not only to foreign and second-language learners, but to the English themselves.

(d) Codification

This is the final stage of the process of standardisation. We have already seen that maximal variation in function is one of the two goals of standardisation. The other goal closely associated with this is the attainment of minimal variation of form. In practice, this means trying to eliminate variation within the standard, and stemming the process of linguistic change. Both these aims, that of elimination of variation and stemming the process of change, constitute the stage called **codification.**

Codification is undertaken by a small elite group of scholars and the method used by them is that of prescription: the evaluation of variants as 'correct', and the elimination of variants which, for some reasons, are felt to be undesirable.

In the codification of English, the example set by other languages is of immense importance. The codifiers looked back at classical Latin and envied the fixity and order of its grammar. Moreover, there were other models too to emulate. Both Italy (in 1582) and France (in 1655) had developed Academies—bodies of learned men, who could make pronouncements on particular variants and changes. For a time, the idea of an English Academy was mooted and among its greatest advocates were figures like Swift, Dryden and Defoe. But by the middle of the 18th century, support for such an institution had waned. As a result certain substitutes to the Academy were

pronounced differently. But others, like Sir Thomas Elyot, clearly sided with the former view.

Attempts to base pronunciation on spelling were not helped by developments in the writing system in the early phase of standardisation. The early printers introduced spellings that had nothing to do with sounds, like the *ue* of *tongue*. Other spellings were remodelled by scholars themselves, to show their origins: the nativised spelling *dette* had a *b* inserted to show that it came from Latin *debitum*. Such pedantry was not the only complicating factor. As already mentioned, the early standard was a very mixed variety, mingling not only the pronunciations of different areas, but also to some extent their traditional spelling systems. The spelling of *busy*, for instance, may reflect the old Winchester standard, whereas its pronunciation is an East Midland one. Some pronunciations themselves appear to have a South-Western origin and some pronunciations seem to have had an East Anglian source. The famous example of spelling irregularity in *bough, though, rough, cough* and *tough* shows how spelling can create the illusion of relationship among words that are either of different origin or whose pronunciations have diverged.

In the early years of standardisation, the precepts of the codifiers had to compete with the push and pull of fashion. Some pronunciations were undoubtedly adopted because for one reason or another, they were considered prestigious. But by the end of the 18th century, codification of the other levels of structure led to the production of the pronouncing dictionary, a book in which the pronunciation of words in the standard variety could be looked up.

Johnson's *Dictionary* had codified not only words but their spellings also; and now that spelling was virtually fixed, it was easier to recommend pronunciation based on them. Johnson himself was of the view that the best pronunciation were those that accorded with the spelling. This precepts was put into effect by John Walker in his *A Critical Pronouncing Dictioinary* (1791). If there was an *h* in the spelling, then *h* should be sounded. The verbal endings *–ing*, as in *going*, should not be pronounced *in'* for the same reason. The pronunciation of whole words like *forehead, often* and *waistcoat* should moreover be reformed in accordance with spelling.

But this process of codification of pronunciation was simultaneously accompanied by the elimination of certain sort of pronunciation. For instance, the most barbarous kind of pronunciation was that associated with the Cockney speech of London and people were asked not to follow it.

By the early 19th century the institution of public schools had developed where a pronunciation that may be described as codified grew up, cultivated and taught.

We should also remember that this process of standardisation was intricately related to social factors. Factors like class and community played a very important role both in the process of codification and elimination. In other words the power relations within the English society were instrumental in the formation of the standard.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how the English language developed a standard dialect. This process of standardisation began quite early and reached its zenith in the 18th century when serious attempts were made by illustrious figures like Dr. Johnson to give the language certain prestige and credibility by standardising various aspects of the language like spelling, pronunciation, etc. We also saw that the process of standardisation involved four different complex stages: **selection, acceptance, elaboration** and **codification.** Moreover, we also came to know that the process of

recommended. These include particular books written or composed by established scholars and literary men. The most famous of these was undoubtedly the *Dictionary* of Dr. Johnson.

Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* is not only of importance in the field of spelling standardisation, but also in the realm of the codification of words and meanings. Dr. Johnson's contribution lies in the fact that he provided an alphabetical list of all the words in the standard language, with their meanings. Before Johnson, the different dictionaries that were available were not of this type. They were either dictionaries of hard words, or bilingual ones. But Johnson achieved something very unique. He listed the range of meanings for each word, including the commonest; and he illustrated each strand of meaning with quotations from writers. In addition, he also provides certain facts about the nature of language, its history, and also its grammar. The prestige enjoyed by the *Dictionary* during the late 18th and early 19th centuries was enormous. This was partly because it answered a need frequently felt by educated and literary people. Moreover, Johnson was regarded as a great man, with an established literary reputation. The individuality of Johnson can be seen on almost ever page of his *Dictionary*. In spite of the fact that sometimes he is frivolous, prejudiced, and wrong, his work is a **landmark in the history of standardisation of English.**

The second half of the 18th century was also the high water-mark for the codification of grammar. The prescriptive nature of codification is seen most clearly with regard to this aspect of language. Although treatises on English grammar had begun to appear in the 16th century, and in the 17th century were compiled by even such authors as Ben Jonson and Milton, it was only in the 18th century that we find a striking outburst of interest in grammar. Treatises like Joseph Priestley's *The Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761), Robert Loweth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) and John Ash's *Grammatical Institutes* (1763) and many more appeared on the scene. The 18th century grammarians aimed to do three things:

(1) To codify the principles of the language and reduce it to rules
(2) To settle disputed points and decide cases of divided usage
(3) To point out common errors

All three aims were pursued concurrently.

The 18th century was the period of the beginning of prescriptive grammar. Certain traditional structures were replaced by more 'correct' forms. For instance, the English pattern *it's me* which had been common for centuries and still is, was deemed incorrect since it did not follow the Latin usage. Hence it was replaced with *It's I*. Similarly *different from* was preferable to *different to* or *different than*, because the *di* part of the word originally indicated 'division' or 'separateness': and therefore *from* suits the etymological argument better. Another instance can be cited in relation to negation. Since Anglo-Saxon times, English had signaled negation by the cumulative use of negative particles. Hence, *I don't know nothing* was a traditional English pattern. By the end of the 18th century this had been labeled illogical, by applying the rule that 'two negatives make a positive'. So, throughout the 18th century, especially in the later part of it, the grammarians were busy codifying rules about grammatical usage and the English we use today is largely a result of these reforms.

Pronunciation is the most difficult aspect of language to codify. The English spelling is the most imperfect and inappropriate model for the sounds we make; yet people have felt bound by it for more than 400 years. Already in the 16th century some scholars interested in the codification of pronunciation had begun to consider the relationship between sounds and spellings. For instance, while Hart, a phonetician argued that spelling should be reformed so as to draw it into line with pronunciation, Mulcaster, a headmaster, rejected this plea for a phonemic model, arguing that people

pronounced differently. But others, like Sir Thomas Elyot, clearly sided with the former view.

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standardisation was not an isolated affair but was intricately associated with the power-relations within the English Society.

2.5 KEY WORDS

Standard	the variety of a language that has the high status in a community or nation and which is based on the speech/writing of the educated, politically and socially powerful group. A standard variety is usually described in dictionaries, grammars, taught in school and universities, and used in media.
Standardization	The process by which a language becomes a standard is known as standardization.
Lingua Franca	a language that is used for communication between different groups of people, each speaking a different language.
Dialect	a variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country (regional dialect), or by people belonging to a particular social class.
Language variation	differences in linguistic behaviour because of differences in region, social class, occupation, gender, etc.
Regional variation	variation in speech according to the particular area where a speaker comes from. Variation may occur with respect to pronunciation, vocabulary, or syntax.
Register	variety of language defined according to its use in situations, i.e. according to the relationship between the participants, the topic discussed and mode of communication (speech or writing)
Prescription	based **not** on usage, but on what the codifiers consider the best or most correct usage.

2.6 READING LIST

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Kachru, Braj B. 1985. Standard, codification and sociolinguistic realism : the English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk and H.G. Widdowson (eds.) **English in the World**. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Trudgill, Peter. 1995. **Sociolinguistics.** 2nd edn. London: Penguin.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term standard language? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
2. Describe in detail the process of standardization of language giving examples from the English Language.
3. Why is Samuel Johnson's dictionary a landmark in the history of standardization of English? Discuss.