

NONSTANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH: AN ANALYSIS

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## INTRODUCTION

The character of a people, sociologists have noted, is made manifest in their language, reflecting the manner in which they think and act. Americans are characteristically a restless and practical people, due largely to early preoccupation with the development of an agrarian frontier, followed by the construction of a mechanized nation. It was in this enterprising and invigorating social climate of the 1930's that H. L. Mencken observed his country's "impatient disregard for grammatical, syntactical and phonological rule and precedent." After studying the speech habits of his day, Mencken remarked that "the American likes to make his language as he goes along, and not all the hard work of the school marm can hold the business back."<sup>1</sup>

However, as the character of a nation changes, so will the character of its language change. As the American society becomes more complex, as the users of English become more numerous and varied in occupation, location, and social situation, then the necessity for a standard level of communication becomes greater. Mass media attempt to reach all Americans, yet a great many citizens are unable to comprehend the same level of written communication.<sup>2</sup> For a democratic society to function intelligently, its people must be able to understand one another and express their thoughts on a common level of

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<sup>1</sup>H. L. Mencken, The American Language. (New York:Oxford University Press, 1936) p. 90.

<sup>2</sup>Charlton Laird, The Miracle of Language. (New York:The World Publishing Company, 1953) p. 27.

writing as well as speaking. Stability is essential if people are to incorporate the contributions of the past and transmit the work of the present on to future generations. Teachers of English assume a most vital role in perpetuating this stability; for them to fail to maintain this standard, according to Robert Pooley, "is to abandon the very core of our obligation to the youth we are obliged to teach."<sup>1</sup>

In order that they fulfill this "obligation to the youth," however, teachers of English must understand not only how standard English and its range of tolerance are determined, but they must decide how to cope with that usage which the definition of standard English excludes. To control this nonstandard usage effectively necessitates an understanding of its content and an understanding of those varieties of English which deviate from standard American usage. Unfortunately, research in this area has been scarce, and the teacher of English tends to simply disregard nonstandard English as "incorrect," or at best, "inappropriate" for classroom consideration. Whatever it is, the educated avoid it, English teachers attempt to eradicate it, and social climbers try to leave it behind. Yet, a vast number of Americans think, converse, and progress through a medium referred to as substandard, illiterate, vulgate, uneducated, incorrect, or, for the purposes of this report, nonstandard English.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert C. Pooley, "Dare Schools Set a Standard in English Usage?" English Journal, (49:176-81) March, 1960.

## PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

It was the purpose of this report to (1) determine the range of standard American English which authorities advise be taught in the classroom; (2) analyze written samples of uneducated, or nonstandard, American usage in order to determine whether there are patterns or trends which characterize its deviation from standard English; and (3) consider whatever implications the presence or absence of such characteristic patterns or trends might afford the teacher of English, especially in his attempts to establish student command of standard English usage.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definition of Terms

English grammar. This term is generally accompanied by a wide variety of connotations, but to the grammarian it is the study of the way the English language is used. It involves the observation of forms and arrangements of words as they are employed singly and in combination to convey meaning in discourse. There is no question of correctness or incorrectness, nor of good and bad grammar.

English usage. The full range of selection and discrimination in the English language varieties is included in this term. It is the variety of language which is appropriate to the situation, the propriety of locutions, at any time in dispute.

English use. All of the principles of the English language

widely in practice are inclusive in this term. These principles are the operant factors of the language and involve no judgment as to correctness.

Traditional grammar. This term is very often associated with a doctrine of prescribed correctness in the use of English. It is that list of "rules" established by eighteenth-century grammarians and perpetuated by many twentieth-century guide books on grammar. It is the usage of English which appears in highly formal, well-edited scholarly writing.

#### Educational Interpretation of Grammar

The role of grammar in the school curriculum bears the brunt of attacks and counterattacks in professional and popular journals. Titles such as "Leave Your Grammar Alone!" "Our National Mania for Correctness," "Who Killed English Grammar?" and "Let's Bring Grammar Back in the Classroom" imply the controversial nature of this lively debate. Opinions and recommendations of noted grammarians overwhelmingly refute the value of teaching traditional grammar, a narrow and restrictive body of rules sustained in most American classrooms but constantly abused by educated persons.<sup>1</sup>

Modern linguists have noted that these traditional rules of usage are uncomfortable to the American people because they are unnatural to his language. W. Francis Nelson, in his study of the

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<sup>1</sup>Bergen Evans, "Grammar for Today," Atlantic Monthly (205: 79-82) March, 1960.

development of English, pointed out that this language's natural development was stilted in the eighteenth century by the imposition of a foreign grammatical structure. Latin was at that time acknowledged by scholars as the norm of communication, and English was consequently analyzed in terms of the "scholarly language" and was restructured where necessary to conform with the principles of Latin grammar. Thus, in the terms of Professor Nelson, "the eighteenth-century grammarians...stretched unhappy English on the Procrustean bed of Latin."<sup>1</sup>

Another distinguished linguist, A. H. Marckwardt, summed up his studies on the history of the English language of the past two centuries by emphasizing that the "highly restrictive and unrealistic rules of grammar do not have a lasting effect on the language as a whole."<sup>2</sup>

It has been only in the most recent few decades that the scientific study of grammar has exposed the ineffectiveness of teaching traditional grammar. The first World War gave the impetus for the wide scale teaching of languages, including English, and research into the nature of English and how it operates was accelerated at that time. Research has been extensive, but conclusions are slow in forming. There is a definite lag in incorporating the findings of

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<sup>1</sup>W. Francis Nelson, "Revolution in Grammar," Quarterly Journal of Speech (40:301) October, 1954.

<sup>2</sup>Albert H. Marckwardt and Fred G. Walcott. Facts About Current English Usage. (New York:Appleton-Century-Crofts) 1938, p. 59.

research and the recommendations of expert teachers into classroom practices.<sup>1</sup>

Studies of the usage of students and adults in comparison to the traditional grammar taught in the American classroom were conducted by W. W. Charters in 1924. Charters found that ninety-five per cent of the children and their teachers came from homes or areas where grammar was incorrect according to the rules, yet schools insisted on its correction by "eternal vigilance and the study of grammar."<sup>2</sup>

That the English grammar taught in most American classrooms is ineffective and futile was the conclusion of one of the earliest studies of language errors among students receiving grammar instruction. The findings of this survey showed that the average increase in mastery of the traditional rules of grammar was very slight from one grade to another. In some cases it was found that errors increased in number and proportion in the later grades, after "teacher attack with the study of grammar."<sup>3</sup>

Authors of a similar study raised the question of whether the teaching of grammar leads to a more confused state of mind in the child than existed when he was in the lower grades and entirely unconscious of the rules of grammar governing selection of the traditionally

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<sup>1</sup>W. Francis Nelson, op. cit. p. 302.

<sup>2</sup>W. W. Charters. Teaching the Common Branches (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924) p. 198.

<sup>3</sup>L. J. O'Rourke. Rebuilding the English Usage Curriculum (Washington: Commission on English Education, 1934) p. 7.



correct words.<sup>1</sup>

A more recent and comprehensive survey of the methods of the teaching of English grammar was conducted by Robert Pooley. His team of researchers visited rural and city schools throughout Wisconsin, observing the amount of class time allotted to formal drills on traditional rules of grammar in comparison to time devoted to creative use of the language. Conclusions of his state-wide study were supported by his analysis of articles in the English Journal, review of selected courses of study, survey of grammar presented in popular textbooks, and direct questions to the state's outstanding teachers. Formal learning and formal drill, he found, dominated overwhelmingly classroom activity in the study of English and supplanted exercises of self-expression to which "grammar is supposed to contribute."<sup>2</sup> Pooley placed the blame for distorted teaching methods on the confusion of teachers and students as to what grammar is and what it may be expected to do.<sup>3</sup>

Modern textbook authors and grammarians as a whole interpret grammar as a study of the way English is used, not the way it should be used. Teachers are advised to relax traditional grammar rules in order to accommodate variations in common use among educated people-- to teach the grammar of standard English.

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<sup>1</sup>Isabel Sears and Amelia Diebel, "A Study of the Common Mistakes in Pupils' Oral English," Elementary School Journal (17:44-54).

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Pooley and Robert D. Williams. The Teaching of English in Wisconsin (Madison:The University of Wisconsin Press, 1948) pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Pooley, Teaching English Grammar (New York:Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940) p.4.

Educational Interpretation of Standard English

The linguistic definition of standard English is simply "the particular language habits socially acceptable in most communities throughout the United States."<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is ambiguous and broad--too broad to meet the classroom needs of teaching English. It was this same regard for social acceptability which gave rise to a narrower and more applicable definition of "good" English adopted by the Council of English:

Good English is that form which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker or writer, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to the speaker and listener, writer and reader. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraint; it is never fixed but changes with the organic life of the language.<sup>2</sup>

A usage of language, then, is correct if it is widely acceptable. Within this broad and somewhat hazy term of "acceptable," or "good," or "standard English," are functional varieties which include the various colloquial dialects of informal conversation as well as the prestige, edited varieties of formal and serious usage. All of the functional varieties are in use by educated persons and serve their needs for clarity of expression appropriate to the situation. Most authorities accept and condone the work of John Kenyon on this subject. His classification of standard varieties is simple and workable, appropriate to classroom instruction.

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<sup>1</sup>C. C. Fries. American English Grammar (New York:Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940) p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Pooley, "Dare Schools Set a Standard in English Usage?" English Journal (49:179) March, 1960.

Kenyon explained that differing degrees of formality mark the functional varieties, and that the criterion for selection is the formality of a particular situation. For example, one would employ different varieties of standard usage in a friendly conversation, in private correspondence, and in formal platform or pulpit address. In the very formal situations of legal, scientific, and scholarly exposition, only the edited, formal variety of English would be appropriate. Usage employed in a newspaper article is quite different from that appropriate to the "prestige" magazines. As temporary as slang may be, Kenyon classified it as a variety of standard English, its acceptable function being only in very informal situations.<sup>1</sup> To Kenyon and to other linguists who write for professional English journals, language is a social media of communication; its correctness is its appropriateness for whatever occasion it is employed.

Authors of textbooks on methods of teaching English vary in their interpretation of how such a general term can be most effectively adapted to classroom instruction. One very interesting and complete treatment of the application has been presented by Hans Guth in a text on English teaching methods. He pointed out that the teacher's task is not to give a rigorously scientific description of usage, but to alert students to some of the more obvious and important distinctions of English usages.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John S. Kenyon, "Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English," College English (10:31-6) October, 1948.

<sup>2</sup>Hans P. Guth. English Today and Tomorrow (Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey:Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 99.

Although the definition of standard English defies rigid content, Guth maintained that stability is essential. It is the teacher's responsibility to point out the limits of the permissible, helping the student understand and master what custom and social practice have made acceptable to educated persons. This is to be achieved by the teacher's knowledge of how the language has developed and is continuing to develop, and his ability to instill this understanding in the student.<sup>1</sup> Guth advocated that teachers of English and their students develop an awareness and sensitiveness to the varieties of usage acceptable to educated people. Thus, command of the standard varieties of English gained in English class will be reinforced by a student's listening and reading outside the classroom. To speak and write effectively, the student will then have more than the ability to find a certain page in a rulebook; he will have developed a sensitivity to stylistic effects that can guide him in his own stylistic choices.<sup>2</sup>

This positive approach to teaching standard English is highly endorsed by most linguists and grammarians, but the problem of how the teacher is to cope with nonstandard English and its control over the numbers of children raised in its environment is an issue which is rarely confronted or effectively met. Teachers are cautioned not to pass judgment of incorrectness on this usage, but are to convey its

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid. p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 212-3.

inefficiency and point out the necessity of mastering standard English in order to function intelligently in society. How to accomplish this feat has not been sufficiently considered, for the study of nonstandard English has been slighted by modern research.

#### Studies of Nonstandard English

Studies of the English language often devote a section to the description or definition of nonstandard English--or, under variable title, the language used by uneducated Americans. Contemporary linguists in their survey of the development of English tend to isolate examples of usage which deviate from standard or educated usage. These examples are very often justified on the grounds of custom or the tendency of people to regularize the irregular conjugations and simplify the difficult spellings or pronunciations. Ferrin justified the double negative by citing examples of that uneducated expression in Shakespearean works. Mencken pointed to examples of simple adjectives used as adverbs by Sir Thomas More and in the Authorized Version of the Bible. Fries dated nonstandard forms (such as clum for climbed) to the standard usage of medieval London, and Arthur Kennedy justified the uneducated tendency to spell phonetically by quoting Chaucer's use of bilder for builder. Isolated examples are numerous, whereas more complete studies of the English usage of uneducated people are few.

Perhaps the most complete coverage of nonstandard usage to be published was that which appeared in H. L. Mencken's monumental work on American English. He described the "vulgate" language of 1930,

basing much of his description on the grammatical errors of Kansas City school children tabulated by W. W. Charters. The compiled list of errors contained such frequently noted deviations from traditional rules of grammar as "there's six left," examples of confusion of will and shall usage, and the use of the double negative construction.<sup>1</sup> The findings lack significance for a study of nonstandard usage, however, for (a) the "grammatical errors" were isolated from the total picture of nonstandard usage and therefore offer no indication of the proportion of "mistakes" to the number of traditionally "correct" expressions; and (b) the study was made of children still in school receiving various degrees of grammar instruction, and cannot therefore be assumed to represent the fully developed speech and writing of uneducated adults. It was apparently not the intention of Mr. Charters to conduct a study of nonstandard American English as a distinct usage in itself, but it was to this end that Mr. Mencken adopted Charter's findings.

The survey of nonstandard American English also cited expressions written by Ring Lardner who, Mr. Mencken felt, reported the sermo vulgus "with complete accuracy."<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Lardner's stories displayed frequent and consistent violation of traditional rules of grammar, including the following: "...not nothing is nearly half...they was not no team...I have not never thought of that...it is ourn...I should ought

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<sup>1</sup>H. L. Mencken. op. cit. p.423-469.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 424.

to leave" and a liberal sprinkling of the word confined to uneducated persons, "ain't."<sup>1</sup> No matter what level of English usage one is accustomed to using, many of these quoted expressions appear to be stilted and uncomfortable to the nature of American English. The noted scholar, C. C. Fries, stated that Larnder is typical of writers who exaggerate caricatures of "the common folk" by excessive use of multiple negatives and other grammatical constructions not found in actual specimens of the "vulgar" or nonstandard English.<sup>2</sup>

The most striking difference, Fries observed, is that vulgate English "is essentially poverty stricken"; there are not so many gross grammatical errors as there is a dominant tendency to rely heavily on certain forms (such as overuse of the word got) showing a lack of any sensitivity to the resources of the English language.<sup>3</sup>

Nonstandard English is simply that usage of the language which standard English excludes by definition. As described by the author of a popular stylebook, it is "not much touched by school instruction."<sup>4</sup> This confines nonstandard English largely to adults who are without high school or higher education, but who have attained at least a fifth grade level of reading and writing ability--the educational range on which the major programs of continuing education are based.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid. p. 468-9.

<sup>2</sup>C. C. Fries. op. cit. p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Porter G. Perrin. Writer's Guide and Index to English (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1948) p. 18.

The extent of nonstandard English in America is indeterminable, although teachers of English would readily agree to the seemingly insurmountable effect it has had on students across the country. In 1960 the United States Office of Education and the Federal Bureau of Census approximated that in that year there were over ten million adult American citizens who had less than five years of formal schooling and who functioned in semi-illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> The total number of adults who have failed to master standard American English, therefore, must greatly surpass the estimated ten million semi-illiterates. The inability of these Americans to communicate intelligently on the national standard of English usage is a weakness which educators feel the American society cannot afford to tolerate. Environments of nonstandard English are much too widespread across the United States, and the force of their influence has been felt in almost every public school. Teachers of English are poorly prepared to meet this force, according to the recent studies of professional preparation for the instruction of English usages. A study published in 1959 concluded that the teacher of English is inadequately trained in knowledge of English usages and methods of teaching English. Therefore, as an arbiter of debatable expressions of usage, that basis on which the teacher rejects or accepts usage is too narrow.<sup>2</sup>

This paper presents a limited analysis of nonstandard usage and

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<sup>1</sup>Malcolm S. Knowles. Handbook of Adult Education in the United States (Chicago:Adult Education Association, 1960) p. 458.

<sup>2</sup>Thurston Womack, "Teachers' Attitudes Toward Current Usage," English Journal (April, 1959) p. 188.



its characteristics in an attempt to contribute to a broader understanding of that usage of English which deviates from standard.

#### THE STUDY

In the summer of 1964, written samples of nonstandard English were obtained from adult classes in English composition. All were written by adults with at least a fifth grade level of reading and writing ability, who were unable to meet literacy requirements to qualify as high school graduates. It was on this basis that their compositions were assumed to be fairly representative of nonstandard English, the usage inappropriate to educated people. The subjects came from city and rural backgrounds, from scattered sections of the United States. Therefore, their usage would not be of a particular dialect or colloquial area, but would be generally representative of nonstandard American English.

#### Limitations of the Study

Samples for analysis were collected from students of English instruction in adult classes. Selection of students for the study of their English usage was based on the following criteria:

- (a) Students were neither illiterate nor educated. Formal schooling ranged from fifth grade to junior high; none surpassed the Armed Forces general testing score of ninety.
- (b) When the study was made, all of the subjects were serving in the United States Army. The composition classes were comprised of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Military rank ranged

from private to sergeant.

(c) Only compositions of students whose native language was American English were used as subjects for this study. Compositions of writers who were immigrants to this country were rejected for use in this analysis.

#### The Method of Research

The study was conducted prior to class instruction in grammar, in order to eliminate any immediate and therefore quite temporary influence of the English teacher or textbook. Students were asked to select a topic of interest from a list devised especially for class interest and familiarity and to write a one-to-two page composition about the topic selected. Before compositions were handed in, the students were to reread their writing for any corrections or changes they wished to make. There were sixty-five papers for analysis.

It was this author's intention to evaluate the individual papers separately in order to determine the extent each deviated from standard English usage. The nonstandard grammatical constructions from each paper would then be compiled and analyzed in proportion to standard usage, not isolated as in previous studies. Thus, from the frequency and consistency of constructions unique to nonstandard English, it could be determined whether there are actual patterns of usage characteristic of nonstandard, or whether the constructions are merely indicative of a confusion of forms, or, as Professor Fries suggested, whether nonstandard usage differs from standard in its ignorance of the many and varied resources of the English language.

### Results of the Study

From a preliminary reading of the sixty-five compositions, several inferences were immediately apparent. The ideas presented had merit and the content was very often amusing, but the presentation of these ideas was generally rough and incomplete. The overall vocabulary was destitute of colorful phrases and words which could offer more precise distinctions in descriptions and interpretations; instead there was complete reliance on a basic, familiar vocabulary which is encountered in everyday speech of children and uneducated adults. The sentence construction was quite inconsistent. Only four of the papers lacked sentence fragments; the others all intermingled incomplete sentences with complete ones. Tense shift was haphazard, the tendency being to describe action in the past tense until the person described "says" something; at that point, the writer very often maintained the present tense thereafter.

The predominant style of writing was direct, short, declarative statements of the subject-verb-object construction. These sentences were either staccatoed with a period or linked by the simple conjunction and. This basic pattern of abruptness varied little. There was consistent avoidance of the passive voice, modifying phrases, and subordinate clauses, all of which would have enriched the style of writing. Sentences lacked smooth transition from one point to another, and the general absence of effective stylistic devices marked the compositions as distinctly nonstandard.

Students' compositions analyzed in this study offered examples of confusion of some standard punctuation marks, avoidance of others, and a stable command of still other marks. It was with the apostrophe that confusion abounded. In contracted forms of auxiliary verbs and various negative verb constructions, the number of apostrophe omissions nearly equaled the number of times the apostrophe was inserted according to standard punctuation with the apostrophe mark. Most of the uneducated writers showed a slight tendency to use the apostrophe in the forms I'll and I'm and to omit it in negative verb formations such as don't and doesn't. Individual as well as group confusion of the correct use of the apostrophe for contraction was apparent, for most of the writers were inconsistent within their own composition, using the apostrophe in some verb contractions while omitting it in others.

The apostrophe inconsistency in verb formations was maintained throughout possessive constructions. The inflectional ending which indicates possession ('s) appeared four times as often without the apostrophe as with it. In this position the apostrophe was unfamiliar to the writers. To the few students who did form the possessive with the preposition of as acceptable to standard usage, the apostrophe still proved troublesome, as in the examples "land of my father's" and "friend of my sister's."

Misuse of the apostrophe was extended into the formation of plural nouns as well. A surprising one-fifth of the papers in the study indicated plurality by the possessive inflection -s, although few of these were consistent in using this inflectional construction

for all plural nouns. Neither the type of plural nor the position of the expression permitted generalizations to be made about patterns of misuse. Clearly, however, the use of the apostrophe was a confused one, not only with the totality of nonstandard English studied, but within the individual samples of nonstandard writing.

Use of other punctuation marks in the compositions analyzed may be generalized as follows. Commas were infrequently employed, usually placed according to length of the word groups--where a speaker might pause for breath. The students did not insert commas to set off a parenthetical expression from the rest of the sentence, to separate items in a series, or in other standard uses of the comma. Because of this style of writing which avoided participial phrases, introductory clauses, and appositives, the papers afforded no opportunity for the author to evaluate standard use or misuse of the comma.

The semicolon did not appear at all. If two main clauses were joined, and or but sufficed, usually without the standard insertion of a comma before the conjunction. There were neither colons, dashes, nor parentheses in any of the papers studied. Quotation marks appeared in only two of the compositions, and that was in a manner unacceptable to standard form of written English.

Capitalization was neither confused nor misused, but appeared in much the same manner as in the writing of educated persons. The personal pronoun I, initial words of a sentence, names of cities and proper names were generally capitalized appropriately.

When the grammar characteristic of the majority of compositions in this study was compared to that appropriate to standard English varieties, none of the sixty-five papers deviated strongly or misused standard forms and expressions as might have been expected. Agreement of subject and verb was generally acceptable to standard usage, there being only twenty-eight disagreeing pairs out of nearly eight hundred subject-verb formations. Of these twenty-eight items, nearly half were the construction there's followed by a plural subject, a construction heard frequently in the speech of educated persons (e.g. "there's only two persons left.")

Other disagreeing subject-verb items consisted of several it don't constructions, although the standard it doesn't occurred regularly throughout the sixty-five papers. The resemblance of the cursive a to an o presented difficulty in distinguishing between use of I came and I come; therefore, no conclusion can be drawn concerning this verb construction. These examples of misuse of standard forms of concord were not frequent enough to represent significant deviation from that usage appropriate to educated people.

Concord of pronouns to their antecedents, however, was not generally acceptable to written standard English. The use of singular antecedents which referred back to someone and everybody was consistently violated in the writing of this study, just as it is often violated in the informal speech of educated people. The indefinite pronouns were paired, as in standard usage, with singular verbs;

however, only one of sixteen antecedents were singular, a disagreement which standard exposition could not accept. "Everybody wants to put their time in" is representative of this usage, an expression which may not be entirely foreign to educated speech, but which would not appear in edited writing. How tolerant standard social conversation might be of this construction is subject for debate, although its appropriateness to edited writing and to classroom writing is doubtful.

Use of the auxiliary verb was generally acceptable to the informal varieties of standard English. A number of compositions used a construction which might pass unnoticed in conversation but which is obviously nonstandard in written form. The contracted have to 've and its past tense form of had contracted to 'd are often barely audible or not heard at all in social, informal conversation, and several writers in this study eliminated these auxiliary endings completely to form phonetic representation of a lazy speech such as I been, I seen, and I gone, all nonstandard forms in writing.

This strong tendency to write what is heard was supported by an occasional phonetic spelling, most apparent in the absence of final dental sounds (words containing an ed, d, or t ending). Nearly half of the compositions contained spellings such as an for and, fine for find, and either the preterite or the predicated adjective without the inflectional -ed ending. Examples such as "I was satisfy," "I was station at," "they ask me," and "I use to go" might be tolerated as a lazy speech in standard informal conversations, but are glaring

examples of nonstandard usage when they appear in written form.

A characteristic of the development of the entire English language is the force of analogy. It is this tendency of a language to conform the irregular to the regular conjugations which caused the medieval forms of help, holp, holpen to regularize to the current and regular forms of help, helped, helped. Some linguistic historians purport analogy to be an operant factor in nonstandard English. That this is so cannot be supported in this study. The nonstandard, and analogous forms of sayed, drived, blowed, and builded each appeared one time, but the use of standard irregular conjugations was predominant. There were fifty-five writers who wrote said as opposed to the single paper which contained the analogous form sayed.

Another construction often attributed to nonstandard English is the use of double and triple negatives. In Mencken's 1930 survey of American English he summarized that "in Vulgar American the double negative is so freely used that the simple negative appears to be almost abandoned."<sup>1</sup> This statement becomes a gross exaggeration when applied to this study, for only five papers contained a double negative, and only one of these five used it more than one time. Eight uses of a double negative and no examples whatsoever of a triple negative in these compositions indicates that either Mr. Mencken's statement was inaccurate, or that nonstandard English has changed

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<sup>1</sup>H. L. Mencken. op. cit. p 468.



drastically since 1930. Neither speculation, however, can be substantiated from this report.

There was a slight tendency of some writers to misplace singular nouns in constructions which needed the use of plural nouns. Ten of the compositions offered examples of singular nouns substituted incorrectly for plural nouns. This may have been the result of carelessness in writing, or perhaps the inflectional plural -s ending had not been heard in speech and therefore was not represented in the subjects' writing. Whatever the cause, the only widespread use of singular for plural nouns was with words of weights and measures, such as two dollar. The misuse was inconsistent and infrequent to the extent that there was insufficient opportunity to analyze these particular types of constructions, but a plural number modifying a singular weight or measure was employed nearly as often as the standard use of a plural modifier before plural measurement (e.g. two dollars). This is hardly adequate evidence to generalize, but the inconsistency suggests that there is much confusion in the plurality of weights and measures.

Frequent use of verb formations and numerous examples of concord between subject and verb and between pronoun and its antecedent provided for a relatively thorough analysis of nonstandard grammar. However, other grammatical constructions which might have offered a study of nonstandard patterns were too scattered and inconsistent to provide a strong basis of inference. There are several expressions which some grammarians consider unacceptable to standard English, but which other

grammarians defend as in common use among educated people. One such expression is the preposition like substituted for the conjunction as. Among educated persons, like is not used as a conjunction in written, edited English. The use of like to introduce subordinate clauses--in preference to the standard conjunction as--presented no problem to the subject in this study. Thirty times the word like introduced subordinate clauses; the formal standard usage of as did not appear at all.

Another grammatical construction which standard English might tolerate in informal situations but would reject in formal writing is the substitution of adjective forms in place of the appropriate adverb forms. Examples of "she was real nice," "time passed so slow," and "he said he use to sing beautiful" were generally representative of the writing in this study. Each of these constructions might be acceptable in the informal conversations of educated persons. The limits of standard English are often hazy, and whether this nonstandard usage of the adjective form of adverbs ending in -ly is tolerable to educated speakers may vary with the individual audience. Certainly, the number of -ly adverbs was considerably less than would be expected to appear in samples of standard writing.

Another unstable construction in standard English is the use of who for the objective form whom. Usually, the substitution is quite acceptable in informal writing and informal conversation, but is not at all firmly established in edited material. The nonstandard writing sampled in this study was consistent in its complete rejection of the objective whom. Who was employed in both nominative and objective

positions. By standards of edited English, the word whom should have appeared thirteen times in these compositions; it did not appear at all. This troublesome pair of pronouns so often bewilders educated persons that they have led many people to rely entirely on the who form for all cases, whereas others, in an attempt to be "correct," insert the whom form whenever the case is doubtful.

Use and misuse of shall and will present another confusion to plague educated persons, offering little confusion to the uneducated, however. The participants in this study usually contracted future auxiliaries to the 'll form. Whenever a future auxiliary was not contracted, however, the will form was consistently used in place of shall. Edited English generally employs shall with the first person singular and plural conjugations, although this is not demanded of informal standard English. Many grammarians have observed that this form is informally restricted to the interrogative position, such as the expression, "shall we dance?" The fact that neither the objective pronoun whom nor the conjunction as nor the future auxiliary shall appeared in these compositions indicates that these unstable forms of standard English are not used in nonstandard writing. Although avoided in informal standard English, their avoidance is complete in nonstandard English.

The study of Charters, as described by Mencken, cited several grammatical expressions which did not appear in the sampled writing. Although personal experiences and observations might cause the reader to expect an occasional ain't, a me and him are, a them was, and a

that was ourn, this study can support none of these forms as being characteristic or even indicative of nonstandard usage. Perhaps the English classroom atmosphere in which these compositions were written influenced the students' selection of usage. However, the author doubts this to be an influential factor, for instruction had not yet begun in the class when the papers were written and the students were not informed that their writing was to be part of a research project.

Although personal observations of the men's speech patterns revealed an occasional use of the word ain't, the discrepancy in usage in written form as shown in these compositions indicates that the students knew that ain't is not appropriate to an English class situation. That this is so cannot be supported in this study which pertains to nonstandard English in its written form only.

There were certain constructions in every composition which educated persons would reject in written form, but which could not be detected in speech. These involve familiar homonyms with different spellings, meanings, and functions. The troublesome trio of there, their, and they're created much confusion and inconsistency in the compositions analyzed. The adverbial there appeared in its appropriate position but was frequently misused, substituting for the possessive pronoun their as well as the pronoun-verb construction they're. Standard usage of their in this study appeared in an approximate ratio of one to every five constructions calling for this possessive form. Although the pronoun-verb they are construction appeared quite often,

the contracted version was each time written as there instead of the standard they're. It could be generalized from the forms used in this analysis that the spelling there is a mobile substitute for all three forms, distinguished explicitly in standard writing.

The homonyms to, too, and two created less confusion and inconsistency. Two was never misused as a number, nor was to misused as a preposition. However, the preposition form to was placed twenty times as an adverb indicating degree, substituting incorrectly for too. The appropriate adverbial form of too only appeared correctly twice, in comparison for the twenty times it was misused. The to and there spellings are the familiar forms to these writers and therefore are the ones substituted for their homonyms in nonstandard writing. Although these various forms of usage would be undetectable in conversation, they would not be tolerated in any functional variety of standard usage.

#### SUMMARY

Modern grammarians have described standard English as that usage which is commonly acceptable to educated Americans, varying in its appropriateness to the situation in which it is employed. The common denunciation of traditionally "correct" usage--which was established in the eighteenth century and is perpetuated in twentieth century rule books leaves the teacher of English in a dilemma. Nonstandard usage cannot longer be rejected merely because it does not conform to a set of rules in the grammar book. Its inadequacy in society must be conveyed

to students. In order that teachers accomplish this effectively, they are obliged to master an understanding of this inadequate, or nonstandard usage. Research into the field of nonstandard English usage has been meager and inconclusive in the determination of general trends and patterns within the usage itself.

Although the analysis of nonstandard English was a limited one, it offered several implications for the teacher of English. There was a tendency of the participants in this study to completely avoid the "correct" uses of whom, shall, and the conjunction as--all of which are frequently avoided in the informal varieties of standard American usage. A study of these terms as used in informal and formal varieties of standard English compared to the nonstandard avoidance of them would indicate more conclusively whether there is a tendency for standard usage as it appears in informal situations and informal writing to align its unstable forms to those of uneducated usage. That these forms do occur in standard usage may be attributed to the assumption that educated people read more extensively than the uneducated, and therefore their encounterance of these forms in edited English would have had a lingering influence on their informal use of English.

There were relatively few instances of disagreement between subjects and verbs and between pronouns and their antecedents. It appeared that this pattern of agreement is similar to the unedited, informal varieties of standard discourse. Further study would be necessary, however, if an adequate comparison is to be made on this

point of grammar.

Examination of the sixty-five compositions indicated that nonstandard writing is inconsistent and confused in its representation of punctuation and its use of certain words which are distinguished in writing but not in speech. Internal punctuation was sparse in all of the compositions, with the absence of semicolons and quotations, colons and dashes. Commas and apostrophes were inconsistently used among the subjects and within individual papers as well. The nonstandard writers' inability to distinguish between the homonyms to and too, and confusion with there, they're and their was widespread, for every composition analyzed contained a misuse of at least one of these forms. It is significant to note that this distinction could be detected only in written forms of English. Deviation from standard usage in regard to punctuation and misuse of homonyms, then, would pass unnoticed in uneducated speech. All of the participants in this study were unable to express a command of punctuation acceptable to standard varieties of American English.

The tendency of many of the subjects to omit the final dental sound of words (-d, -t, -ed) implies the laxity of their speech, especially in their use of the past tense of the words use and ask. It follows from the comparison of standard and nonstandard speech that there is little dissimilarity between the spoken grammar of educated and uneducated persons. For example, neither educated nor uneducated persons would make a spoken differentiation between "there're enough

men" and "there enough men" or between "you and I used to go" and "you an I use to go." The major distinction would appear in a comparison of the written discourse.

It was suggested by a modern grammarian that this circumstance of a common speech but a distinctly different written form of the common language is unique to America. He wrote that "ours is probably the only country on earth in which 3000 miles of travel will bring no difficulty of spoken communication."<sup>1</sup> Because of the ease of verbal understanding between educated and noneducated people, the necessity for a well-established written standard of American English for all to master is easily ignored. When speech is transferred to paper, however, the inability of Americans to communicate on a common level becomes apparent.

#### EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Further research into the differences between educated and uneducated usages of the English language is essential before teachers can gain an adequate understanding of the entire range of the American language. Implications of this study need to be substantiated before educators utilize them, but these implications are significant for consideration. If, as a comparison to the 1930 survey of Mr. Mencken indicates, the grammatical differences between educated and uneducated

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Whitehall. Structural Essentials of English (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956) p. 3.



are lessening, the causes of this linguistic merger might be revealed through further research. It was not the purpose of this report to investigate possible influences on language developments, although the impact of compulsory education and the extensive reach of mass media in recent years are major factors for consideration.

A grammarian can only hint at the stability of this merging tendency. Through extended research, future trends within the language might be predicted, and educators could then gear their teaching programs to accommodate these developments or, if need be, control the movements.

That the nonstandard usage sampled in this study deviated little from standard informal English in most aspects indicates that time spent on the mechanics of grammar, such as capitalization drills, might be better utilized by giving attention to improving students' awareness of the resources of the English language. The stagnant and inexpressive use of English exemplified in these compositions is perhaps not unique to uneducated usage. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the way English is currently used by the uneducated and educated alike, the cause being attributed to ineffective instruction in the English class. To this end, Donald J. Lloyd urged his audience of a national conference of English teachers to turn away from established practices and enable students to read and write for the expression of the idea, as is the most effective or appropriate selection of usage for the particular

situation and audience. Language is an instrument of communication which students must learn to manipulate so that it may effectively express their thoughts and feelings. To achieve this control, students will need the guidance of alert teachers, well prepared to explore and convey intelligently the unlimited ways to utilize the English language. In addition to this ability to use their language, it is hoped the student will realize the need for a standard, common usage for all to master--for all to communicate and thus perpetuate the intelligent functioning of a democratic society.

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NONSTANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH: AN ANALYSIS

by

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B. A., University of Missouri, 1962

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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It was the purpose of this report to 1) determine the range of standard American English which authorities advise be tolerated and taught in the classroom; 2) analyze written samples of uneducated (nonstandard) usage in order to determine whether there are patterns or trends which characterize its deviation from standard usage; and 3) consider the implications which the presence or absence of such characteristic patterns or trends might afford the educator.

In order to carry out these objectives, 1) the literature of noted grammarians and textbooks of English instruction were reviewed for interpretations of standard English; 2) compositions written by uneducated adult Americans were collected; 3) these compositions were analyzed individually and as a body of nonstandard writing; and 4) the findings of this study were evaluated with regard to classroom practices of teaching English usage.

Standard English is necessarily an ambiguous and flexible term, but it is generally defined as the varieties of English usage currently in use by educated Americans throughout the country. The appropriateness of these varieties is determined by the degree of formality of the situation and audience. Thus the varieties of standard American English range from the usage of educated people in informal conversations and private correspondence to the highly formal writing of edited, scholarly journals.

Studies of nonstandard American English have been few and not at all extensive. Usage described as characteristic of uneducated



people is too frequently exaggerated. In this study of sixty-five compositions written by uneducated adults, it was found that their nonstandard writing differed little from informal, standard English in regard to punctuation, capitalization, and basic grammatical construction. The factor which obviously marked these compositions as nonstandard was their stagnant repetition of certain words and phrases and the redundancy of short, simple sentence patterns. The dominant tendency of these writers studies was to rely heavily on a style and vocabulary which lacked the precise and interesting presentation of thought.

Implications of this study need to be substantiated by further research before educators can utilize them, but these implications are significant for consideration. It is suggested that teachers of English re-evaluate teaching programs and rechannel concentration from drill on the basic mechanics of grammatical usage to exercises devised to develop a student's ability to understand and manipulate the American English language, so that it serve his intellect. By conveying the resources of the language and helping students to explore these stylistic resources, teachers may liberate students from a background environment of nonstandard English.