

English in the World

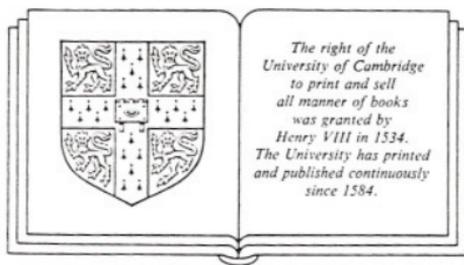
Teaching and learning the language
and literatures

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over fifty years

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Commentator 2

David Crystal

I very much agree with Professor Quirk's emphasis on standard English. I am sure this is the nub of the matter. What concerns me, however, is the way in which all discussion of standards ceases very quickly to be a linguistic discussion, and becomes instead an issue of social identity, and I miss this perspective in his paper. The social origins of the notion of 'standard' are evident in dictionary definitions of the term, e.g. 'something established by authority, custom or general consent as a model or example' (*Longman Dictionary of the English Language*). Society indeed confers or sanctions the status of standard on something, as Professor Quirk has clearly indicated, and it thereby acquires the secondary sense of 'a degree of quality or worth', which in turn leads to the pejorative uses of 'non-standard' and 'sub-standard'. The term renews its connection with society whenever there are arguments about usage, though often the social assumptions remain below the surface. For example, at a local level, the arguments used by teachers when correcting a child's written English are often couched in purely linguistic terms: you shouldn't use *ain't* – why? – because it isn't standard English. But this is to identify the problem, not to explain it, and any follow-up question of the sort 'But why do I have to write/speak standard English?' leads inevitably to social reasoning (the need to pass exams, to get a job, to qualify as a member of a profession, and so on).

The same principle applies globally, only now the question of identity becomes more difficult. Consider the range of items which can be used to fill the slot in the kind of question frames a social psychologist might use: 'If he speaks English, he must be . . .'. Depending on where you live, so the answer might be 'British / American / an imperialist / an enemy / one of the oppressors / well-educated / a civil servant / a foreigner / rich / trying to impress / in a bad mood . . .'. There is a long list of possible clozes, and not all make pleasant reading. This conference is concerned to evaluate progress in English studies, in which case we must not forget those areas where the spread of English is bad news, and where people are antagonistic towards the language, for a variety of social, economic or political reasons. How would the slot be filled in parts of Francophone Canada, for example? Or in parts of Wales, Scotland and Ireland? Or, these days, in different parts of India? Or amongst certain groups in South Africa, or West Africa, or indeed in any area where language planning policies are having to take seriously the identity demands of minority groups? The question is not so much *do* people use English internationally, but in what state of mind, with what attitude, do they use it? Are they proud of it, or

ashamed of it? Do they see it as a strength or as a weakness? Who do they see themselves as being identified with, when they use it, and are they happy to be so identified?

These questions can all of course be applied to any one variety of the language, as well as to the language as a whole. Thus we may ask them of RP, of network American, or of any regional or class variety. We may ask them of standard English within England, as Professor Quirk points out. But before all this, we need to ask them of the 'single monochrome standard' which is the theme of his paper. The many questions, in effect, reduce to one: should not the quantitative view of English in the world be supplemented by a rigorous qualitative view – a pragmatic or ergonomic view – in which we recognize levels of acceptance, acquiescence and antipathy amongst those who have come to use the language; and in the end is not this view of far greater importance for those involved in world English teaching and research than a simple awareness of the unity and spread of the standard language? I see two questions here. However, let me cut them down to one. Professor Quirk's final paragraph began: 'The English language works *pretty well* in its global context today'. My question comes from the kind of sociolinguistic viewpoint I have been outlining, and it is simply this: 'How pretty is pretty?'