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# Policy Mechanisms of the Standard Language Ideology in England's Education System

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines textual traces of the standard language ideology within current education policy in England, focusing on post-2010 reforms which are characterised by a (re)shift towards conservatism, discipline, and standards. Using tools and methods from critical stylistics and the critical discourse analysis of language policy, I interrogate a number of mechanisms which textually reinforce and reproduce the standard language ideology: curriculum documents, assessment instruments, national test materials and guidance for teachers. Whilst previous criticisms of current policy have focused on individual policy mechanisms, in this article I examine these mechanisms as a *cluster*, showing how they work together as de facto language policy. I show how teachers are presented with a de-historicised and de-politicised version of standardised English which masks the structural power relations that are embedded in language, and how they are constructed as standard language role-models who have a professional duty to reproduce the standard language ideology.

## KEYWORDS

Critical language policy; England; language ideology; schools; standardised English

## Language, power, schools

When children leave English schools today, few are able to speak and write English correctly. (Marenbon, 1987, p. 5)

Thousands of children [...] leave school unable to compose a proper sentence, ignorant of basic grammar. (Gove, 2010)

Schools are key spaces in which the intersections between language, power, and identity get concretised, often through the imposition of socially constructed “rules” and “standards.” They are spaces where practices and discourses become regulated and homogenised to be in keeping with dominant ways of thinking, behaving and speaking, which has consequences in relation to the creation and maintenance of linguistic inequality (Tollefson, 1991) and the suppression of linguistic identity (Shohamy, 2006). Education policies represent particularly explicit attempts by authorities to perpetuate the stratification of language in schools, where the privileging and marginalising of different language varieties becomes enshrined in text. This constructed notion that there are “better,” “worse,” and “appropriate” varieties of language run central to the *standard language ideology* (e.g., Lippi-Green, 2012; Milroy & Milroy, 2012), a key concept for this article which is explored in greater depth in the following sections. The two quotes which opened this article provide an initial example of the standard language ideology within political discourse and its historical perseverance, both being taken from discourse which framed the introduction of a new state-imposed national curriculum in England.

As a way of conceptualising language policy, I combine Lippi-Green's (2012) language subordination model with Shohamy's (2006) “expanded” model, which sees policy fall between *ideologies* and *practices* as a set of covert and overt “mechanisms,” such as curriculum documents, tests, linguistic landscapes, rules, and regulations. These mechanisms are used to:

Create de facto language practices in educational institutions, especially in centralized educational systems. Language education policy is considered a form of imposition and manipulation of language policy as it is used by those in authority to turn ideology into practice through formal education. (Shohamy, 2006, p. 76)

This article examines the textual content of a cluster of mechanisms from post-2010 education reforms in England. It shows how these mechanisms work as de facto language policy in reproducing the standard language ideology, using tools from critical stylistics (e.g., Jeffries, 2010, 2014), an approach to text analysis which interrogates how language choices concretise ideologies and are used to represent a particular view of the world. As a caveat, it is important to foreground that language discourses do not reside in policy mechanisms alone and are not insulated from classroom practice, but get “lived” through interpretations, enactments, and resistances by policy “doers,” such as students, teachers, and management (e.g., Godley et al., 2007; Johnson, 2013). “Doing policy” is not a unidirectional, top-bottom flow, but involves creative recontextualisations and adaptations in accordance with the local context of the school (see Ball et al., 2012). Neither is it my assumption that language ideologies found within policy mechanisms are simply and uncritically reproduced by teachers, nor that teachers are powerless “servants of the system” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 79). As is clearly demonstrated in work such as Menken and García (2010), teachers are key agents in the policy-making process, even in sociopolitical contexts with highly centralized educational policies such as England.

Nevertheless, a critical reading of policy offers one step in beginning to understand its social life, and how top-down policy mechanisms might work as technologies to further bolster the status of powerful groups and marginalise others, in textually concretising and reproducing existing language ideologies which perpetuate the stratification of language(s). As Hult (2017, p. 113) writes, textual work on policy mechanisms involves “critical reading with the aim of bringing to light how (language) ideologies and relationships among languages and their speakers are entextualized.” Close readings and analyses of policy mechanisms allow for the uncovering of the ideological underpinnings of government efforts to construct and circulate ideas about language in schools, with policy discourse taken to have the *potential* to reproduce power imbalances involving the “symbolic violence, erasure, or disqualification of pupils linguistic resources” (Jaspers, 2018, p. 708). Although I recognise the ways that policy mechanisms are subjectively enacted in schools, they are nevertheless the “instruments and effects of discourse” (Ball, 2015, p. 307) and textually represent ideas, demands, and requirements by government. This article then offers an original contribution in its detailed analysis of state-produced language policy mechanisms currently in circulation in England, especially those that work to discursively reproduce, realize, and resemiotise the standard language ideology. It attends to and looks closely at policy as “text” rather than as “practice,” where the focus is on uncovering the language ideologies contained within policy mechanisms, rather than how these policies get enacted in their situated contexts.

Of interest to this article is current education policy in England, namely the large-scale curriculum and assessment reforms which began in 2010 under the coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, and from 2015 onwards, under the majority Conservative government. The reforms are typically associated with Michael Gove, who spearheaded new policies during his time as Education Minister from 2010 to 2014. However, “standard language cultures” (Milroy, 2001) have been firmly embedded within UK education policy for decades (see Clark, 2001; Paterson, 2010) especially as a result of the “standards agenda” which dominated education policy during New Labour’s tenure of 1997–2010 (see Moss, 2009). Post-2010 reforms are largely characterised by Anglocentric, *c*/Conservative values and ideologies, an overt preference for so-called “traditional” curricula and pedagogies, high-stakes testing, surveillance, and strict behaviour management policies (e.g., Belas & Hopkins, 2019; Perryman et al., 2018). As this study argues, ideologies about language played a major role in the propagation of these broader educational ideologies, with a notable (re)emphasis placed on standardised English, in what Grainger and Jones (2013) describe as a re-emergence of monoglossic and deficit language discourses in England’s schools. The research question used to steer this study was:

What textual traces of the standard language ideology exist across policy mechanisms in England’s current education system?

This article seeks to reveal the climate of standardised language as represented textually in current policy, arguing that a cluster of mechanisms work together to institutionally promote, proscribe, and legitimise standardised English via curricula, language tests, assessment criteria, and guidance for teachers. Before examining these mechanisms in detail, I present an overview of the standard language ideology and the way it can operate as a form of control in schools. I then outline Shohamy's (2006) model of language policy mechanisms and Lippi-Green's (2012) language subordination model as ways of conceptualising the relationship between ideology, policy, and standardisation.

## Schools and the standard language ideology

Standardised English is a socio-political construct, an "idealised" and "correct" version of the language (Crowley, 2003; Wright, 2000) with its origins deriving from the written, literary form of English and its "users" characterised by their social prestige and power, such as their middle-class status and whiteness (Flores, 2016). Its power today is perpetuated through institutions such as the media, schools, government, and universities, with its most tangible manifestations in written language. Standardisation is a process of conventionalisation and naturalisation, slicing up a language into boundaries, binaries, and *chains of oppositions* (Milani, 2010) such as "standard"/"non-standard" and "correct"/"incorrect." It involves the "imposition of uniformity" (Milroy, 2001, p. 531) and the "regulation of discourse" (Crowley, 2003, p. 7), working to suppress nonstandardised varieties as "non-compliant" whilst constructing the standardised form as a single, precious category against which all other varieties are measured against. One major consequence of language standardisation then, is that linguistic identity and variability is institutionally inhibited, and so can be thought of as a form of "linguistic engineering" (Shohamy, 2006, p. 64), carried out by powerful authorities, and propagated through mechanisms such as language policy documents, tests, and regulations.

Given the social dominance and privileges of the groups who construct and gatekeep standardised English, the variety itself has been attributed power and prestige, indexed with ways of "speaking correctly" (Milroy, 2001, p. 532). Underpinning this set of indexical beliefs about language is the standard language ideology, framed in this article as a constant process of *weathering*, which is not always immediately observable or apparent. Lippi-Green (2012) defines it as follows: "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 67). The standard language ideology persists because it is "carefully tended and propagated" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 61) by powerful and authoritative institutions, people, and discourses, with schools being one of the key spaces in which this socialisation process occurs (e.g., Corson, 1999; Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2019; Philips, 1998). In his own critical deconstruction of this process, Milroy writes how schools have become places where:

Children must be taught the *canonical* forms of their own native language, mainly at school [...] by those who know the rules of "grammar," correct meanings of words and correct pronunciation, and these rules and norms all exist outside the speaker. The (usually unnamed) authorities on whom speakers (and their teachers) depend have privileged access to the mysteries of language and have something of the status of high priests. (Milroy, 2001, p. 537, original emphasis)

Schools then, are typically hotbeds of standardised language activity, along with the construction of a certain type of "ideal pupil." In this sense, an "ideal pupil" is one who uses a particular set of linguistic resources and conforms to a particular identity, including the use of "good" (i.e. standardised) English, in order to gain access to education and the job market. People who are deemed to not comply with these rules can face sanctions and penalties, for instance, through language policing and discrimination (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2020; Cushing, 2020a; Snell, 2013), and social exclusion (e.g., Kiramba, 2018).

Although a comprehensive history of standardised English in England's schools is beyond the scope and aims of this article, critical accounts can be found in, amongst others: Ager (2003), Cameron

(2012), Clark (2001), and Crowley (2003). More focused work on specific policy interventions and curricula include Sealey's (1999) critique of primary school policy, who reveals a highly de-politicised conceptualisation of standardised English and an "implicitly prescriptive stance towards language use" (Sealey, 1999, p. 90). Similarly, Paterson (2010) discusses a lack of clarity and coherency in definitions for standardised English in 1999 and 2011 curriculum documents. Critiques of *current* policy in England have focused on specific policy documents as opposed to an assemblage of policy mechanisms. For example, Bell (2015) focuses on the primary school curriculum and the accompanying glossary of grammatical terms, but gives little discussion to standardised English (Bell, 2015, p. 150), instead focusing on the lack of pedagogical guidance for grammar. Cushing (2020a, 2020b) critiques a number of local-level school policies which centre around the policing, stigmatisation, and proscription of nonstandardised language, and typically implemented with intertextual references to macro-level policy mechanisms. This work highlights the material consequences that language policies underpinned by standard language ideologies can have, also captured in Brady's (2015) study with students in an economically deprived area of London, showing how young people saw nonstandardised language as a way of expressing identity, but had been socialised into accepting the exclusive legitimacy of standardised English in schools.

### Methods and data: Policy mechanisms and language subordination

Whilst previous research on current policy in England has shown the material consequences of the standard language ideology through the exploration of a single policy document, this article sees language policy as a networked and dense cluster of mechanisms. Shohamy's (2006) "expanded" model captures how ideologies get concretised into policies through mechanisms, reproduced in Figure 1.

The expanded view of language policy reveals covert and overt ways of imposing language ideologies and offers a method which is concerned with the intertextual and interdiscursive dynamics, relationships, and co-dependencies of different policy mechanisms. Shohamy's framework is particularly powerful in that it considers the hidden and discriminatory agendas of language policies and the ways in which those in power such as governments and educational institutions manipulate language ideologies and work to suppress linguistic identities. As adhered to in this article, use of Shohamy's model requires the triangulation of multiple data sources, in order to interrogate textual patterns across different mechanisms through critical, discursive means (see also Barakos, 2016). I also draw on Lippi-Green's (2012) language subordination model, as a way of tracing the processes by which

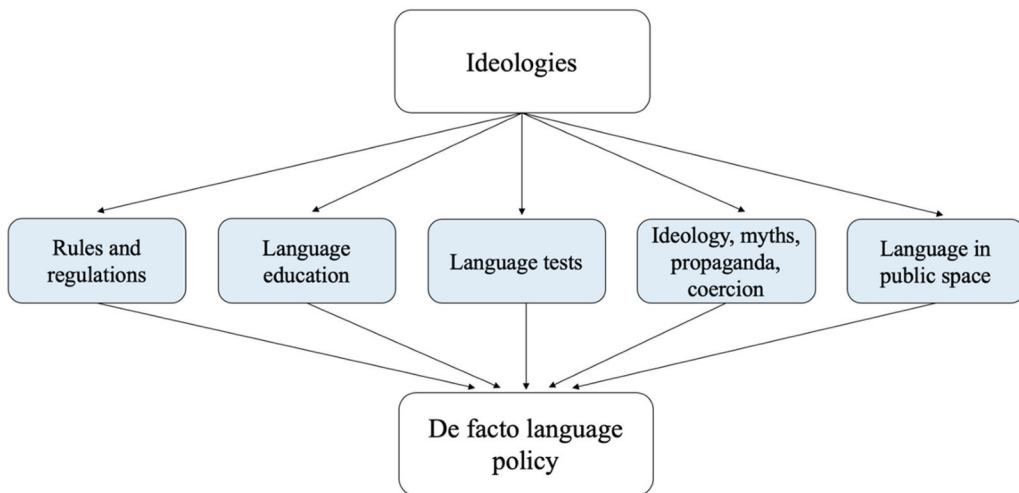


Figure 1. Policy mechanisms between ideology and practice (based on Shohamy, 2006, p. 58).

**Table 1.** The language subordination model (from Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 70).

| Step  | Illustration   |
|---|--|
| Language is mystified                       | <i>You can never hope to comprehend the difficulties and complexities of your mother tongue without expert guidance.</i>               |
| Authority is claimed                        | <i>We are the experts. Talk like me/us. We know what we are doing because we have studied language, because we write well.</i>         |
| Misinformation is generated                 | <i>That usage you are so attached to is inaccurate. The variant I prefer is superior on historical, aesthetic, or logical grounds.</i> |
| Targeted languages are trivialised          | <i>Look how cute, how homey, how funny.</i>  |
| Conformers are held up as positive examples | <i>See what you can accomplish if you only try, how far you can get if you see the light.</i>  |
| Non-conformers are vilified or marginalized | <i>See how wilfully stupid, arrogant, unknowing, uninformed and/or deviant these speakers are.</i>                                     |
| Explicit promises are made                  | <i>Employers will take you seriously; doors will open.</i>   |
| Threats are made                            | <i>No one important will take you seriously; doors will close.</i>   |

**Table 2.** Coverage of language policy mechanisms selected as data.

| Policy mechanism  | Metadata   |
|---|--|
| Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (DfE, 2017)                         | Standards for educational providers from birth to five years, outlining required areas of learning and development.  |
| Primary school curriculum framework (DfE, 2014a)                            | Curriculum content for students at primary school, from 4/5 years through to 11/12 years. This covers all subjects and includes year-by-year instructions as to when content should be introduced. |
| Secondary school curriculum framework (DfE, 2014b)                          | Curriculum content for students at secondary school 11/12 years to 15/16 years. This covers all subjects and includes the specified programmes of study for each of these.                         |
| Primary-secondary grammar glossary (DfE, 2014a, pp. 80–98)                  | Appendix to the primary-secondary curriculum. This is intended as guidance for teachers, rather than content which is to be learnt/taught.   |
| Primary school Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test framework (STA, 2015) | Document which specifies the purpose, format and content of primary school tests and to guide test developers in their construction and review of test questions.                                  |
| Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013a)  | Document specifying guidance for school leaders, staff and governing bodies, outlining the minimum level of practice expected of trainee and practicing teachers.                                  |
| Secondary school English assessment criteria (DfE, 2013b)                   | Document outlining the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for GCSE English language, a compulsory qualification for all students at secondary school level.                                 |
| Professional Skills Test (DfE, 2015)  | Document for candidates taking the Professional Skills Test, a compulsory test in literacy and numeracy for applicants to teacher education programmes.  |

language varieties get institutionally constructed, controlled, and suppressed through policy texts. The model is built on the workings of the standard language ideology and out of an analysis of “reactions or actions of dominant bloc institutions when a threat to the authority of the homogenous language of the nation-state has been perceived” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 69). In keeping with the way language policy is framed in this article, the subordination model sees policies as being underpinned by a set of political, ideological, and educational agendas, and deployed as one attempt to impose artificial notions of standards. The model is as seen in Table 1.

In this article, I apply the steps in the left-hand side of Table 1 to current educational policy in England, guided by the types of policy mechanisms as outlined in Figure 1. I do not apply the steps in a linear order, but shift and toggle between them to show how language subordination and the standard language ideology repeatedly surface across these mechanisms.

The data analysed in this article are shown in Table 2. Data were selected on the grounds that it represented key policy mechanisms concerned with post-2010 education policy reforms and captured both curriculum content and assessment instruments. This selection procedure ensured a comprehensive coverage, from early years education, primary education, and secondary education. Assessment and gatekeeping mechanisms for trainee and practicing teachers were also included. As is clear from this, all data were produced by the Department for Education (DfE) or the Standards and



Testing Agency (STA), two government bodies who create national education policy in England. The DfE and the STA are powerful institutions in authoritative positions and are thus able to deploy these mechanisms in efficient ways, as well as having immediate access to economic resources, sanctions, penalties, and rewards.

An important consideration here is that these documents are not exclusively concerned with language, nor declared as “language policy documents,” but are broader education policy documents of which language plays a part, and so function as “hidden” or de facto language policies. In my discussion of the policy mechanisms outlined in Table 2, I also refer to a number of political speeches made by the two prominent educational ministers associated with post-2010 reforms: Michael Gove and Nick Gibb (e.g., Gibb, 2018a; Gove, 2010). These are used to further illustrate the broader, socio-political context and ideologies about education which characterised post-2010 reforms, and to highlight instances of interdiscursivity in examining how ideas about language frame policy and political debate.

In examining the dataset, I adopted a critical stylistic approach to analysing the textual content of language in education policy (e.g., Jeffries, 2010, 2014). Critical stylistics shares some of the principles of critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 2010), but places a much greater emphasis on the importance of linguistic patterns and choices at micro-textual level. It offers a suitable method in uncovering the ways in which power imbalances and language ideologies are (re)produced through semiotic means and how a particular version of the world is constructed through language. The focus that critical stylistics places on textual manifestations of *ideology* means that it is particularly well-suited for exploring the standard language ideology, especially in the ways that it is outlined in Lippi-Green’s subordination model. When used in dialogue with Shohamy’s model, critical approaches to text analysis such as stylistics allow researchers to unpack policy mechanisms as “tools of organising what can be said and done and what is left unsaid” (Barakos, 2016, p. 31).

The process of data analysis was as follows. I began by reading all data sources closely, conducting an initial sketch of places where the standard language ideology surfaced. Documents were then uploaded to NVivo, with the entire dataset then being searched for key terms and oppositional binaries associated with the standard language ideology. These included metalinguistic noun phrases (e.g., “grammar”; “standard English”) and subjectively loaded modifiers (e.g., “correct”; “clearly”; “appropriate”). I also attended to the discursive construction of “teachers” and “pupils” and how they were positioned as policy actors/subjects within the language subordination model. These results were used to then steer the choices of data chosen for a more focused textual analysis. In particular, using the critical stylistic function of “naming and describing” (Jeffries, 2014, pp. 17–36) proved important as this enabled me to look closely at the ways in which “language,” “teachers” and “pupils” were represented and positioned. I specifically attended to illustrations of the steps outlined in Table 1, or where language ideologies became concretised via textual patterns and choices, reproducing language-related issues of power which maintain the established sociolinguistic order.

### **Authority, mystification, misinformation, trivialisation**

I begin with a critique of the discourses around standardised English on the 2014 national curriculum frameworks, looking at both primary (Department for Education [DfE], 2014a) and secondary (DfE, 2014b). These government-produced, anonymously authored, legally-binding documents are issued to all state-maintained educational institutions in England and consist of the curriculum content that must be taught. They are powerful policy mechanisms, claiming to represent “the best that has been thought and said” and “essential knowledge needed to be an educated citizen” (DfE, 2014a, p. 6; see Alexander, 2014 for a developed critique), and so immediately foreground an elitist stance which interdiscursively wraps up standardised English with notions of citizenship and societal expectations. In terms of the language subordination model, they issue an explicit claim to authority, being produced by bureaucratic bodies and protected under statutory law. Given that teachers have a professional duty to “deliver” the curriculum, they are here positioned as the powerful “managers” of language in schools (Spolsky, 2009, pp. 90–114), and propagators for the kinds of ideologies the

policy contains. The term “Standard English” appears 16 times in the primary framework and 13 times in the secondary framework, with its first appearance being:

Pupils should be taught to speak clearly and convey ideas confidently using Standard English. They should learn to justify ideas with reasons; ask questions to check understanding; develop vocabulary and build knowledge; negotiate; evaluate and build on the ideas of others; and select the appropriate register for effective communication. [...] This will enable them to clarify their thinking as well as organise their ideas for writing. (DfE, 2014a, p. 10)

Teachers here are immediately constructed as policy actors who have a professional duty to teach their pupils how to speak in standardised English. This extract is presented to readers early in the document, and without any description of what is meant by “Standard English,” yet it is indexically associated with academic success and high performing students, as well as being equated with subjective behaviours such as to “speak clearly,” “think clearly” and “organise ideas.” Similar discourses which map on subjective judgements to linguistic “performance” and “success” are found throughout the document, for instance, in the requirement that students must “speak audibly and fluently with an increasing command of Standard English” (DfE, 2014a, p. 16). As such, curriculum policy discursively constructs and perpetuates the idea that standardised English is a blanket criterion for school achievement and classroom participation, where a “standard” form of the language is projected onto notions of academic success. It uncritically biases the use of standardised English as a litmus test for absolute socioeconomic attainment, and in doing so, equates the absence of standardised English with a lack of success and a lack of so-called “clear speaking and thinking.” Indeed, the framework later asserts that students who do not “learn to speak [...] fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised” (DfE, 2014a, p. 13), with the assumption being that nonstandardised English does not count as a legitimate code in the school or beyond, an idea which is firmly “built into the text” (see Jeffries, 2010, p. 94). Curriculum content here does nothing to acknowledge the structural and political issues concerned with standard language domination and its histories, instead placing a crude requirement on individuals to adapt their behaviour in accordance with “normative” language practices. Finally, representing standardised English and other varieties in terms of “appropriateness” serves to “dress up inequality as diversity” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 536), reproducing dominant and racialised social rules of “in/appropriacy.”

Policy discourse works to socialise students into the standard language ideology from an early age, with the first year of primary school policy (where students are ages 4–5) stating that students “must begin to use some of the distinctive features of Standard English in their writing” (DfE, 2014a, p. 25). Although the term “Standard English” is not used in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (DfE, 2017), students are still required to reach an elaborate set of state-imposed language standards, which are geared around an autonomous model of “literacy skills” which separate language from its social use (Street, 2003). These include the subjective notion of a “good standard in English” (DfE, 2017, p. 9; see Fashanu et al., 2020, pp. 95–97 for a developed critique of this policy mechanism and its monolingual ideologies). Textual notions of “goodness” and “correctness” are further concretised later in the primary and secondary curricula, with teachers again constructed as policy actors whose role is to act as a conduit for the simple transmission of these ideologies, initially framed through two uses of the deontic modal verb “should”:

They should be taught the *correct* use of grammar. They should build on what they have been taught to expand the range of their writing and the variety of the grammar they use. (DfE, 2014a, p. 10, italics added)

Adjectives such as “good” and “correct” collocating with nouns such as “grammar,” “language” and “English” represent textual traces of the standard language ideology. These constructions reduce language to an artificial system of “right” and “wrong” answers or “chains of oppositions” (Milani, 2010), working to further mystify and abstract it away from actual human usage. Given the emphasis on standardised English throughout the rest of the curricula, it is implied that this version of the language represents “correct grammar,” determining the criteria for language legitimacy and correctness whilst potentially coercing policy subjects to speak in certain ways. In terms of the language



subordination model, discourses about “correct” grammar (re)produce deeply embedded myths about language, presenting teachers with a reductive model of language which is inherently prescriptive and discriminatory. Furthermore, this model of language is overly-simplistic and additive, with standardised English constructed as something which improves existing language: it “*builds on*” and “*expands* [...] the variety of the grammar they use” (DfE, 2014a, p. 10, italics added), serving to further delegitimise nonstandardised language as something which is insufficient in itself and requires remedial intervention from teachers. The ideology here is that children arrive at school without *any* standard features in their linguistic repertoires, whereas evidence would suggest that children acquire sociolinguistic variation simply as part of the typical acquisition process (see Moore, forthcoming), and that nonstandardised grammar is a fundamental aspect of developing linguistic identity, especially in peer-groups in school settings (e.g., Snell, 2013).

In both primary and secondary curricula, an extensive glossary of clause-level grammatical terms is provided as an appendix (DfE, 2014a, pp. 80–98). This was written by a linguist and designed as an “aid” for teachers rather than as a body of knowledge for students to learn. Bell (2015) includes a discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the glossary, including that its introduction acknowledges that there are different theories of grammar. However, the glossary presents these grammatical terms as the ones that are used by “most modern books on English grammar” (DfE, 2014a, p. 80), with them being broadly classified as “traditional” grammar. This includes an entry for “subjunctive,” a construction associated with particularly formal and archaic registers, and insisted upon by the then Education Minister, Michael Gove (Hudson, personal communication). The definition for “Standard English” is shown in Table 3, with bold type indicating a cross-reference.

Bell (2015, p. 150) argues that this is “clear enough” and that there is “no real sense of stigma.” A more politically engaged reading of the definition would contest this, given that standardised English is a socially constructed, racialised, and classed variety of English which is intimately and historically bound up with linguistic marginalisation and oppression. For instance, Flores (2016) shows how standardised English is a raciolinguistic project which discursively produces and reinforces the Western bourgeoisie in opposition to racialised and minoritized groups (see also Bonfiglio, 2002). The glossary reifies standardised English by constructing it as a natural, discrete, empirically identifiable category which can be easily identified, taught, assessed, and policed. As with previous definitions of standardised English within England’s curriculum policy then (see Paterson, 2010), the current definition obfuscates the socio-political roots and power of standardised English, does not explain that it is an idealised and abstract version of the language, nor *why* it is seen to be prestigious. Consequently, given that it avoids any mention of language ideology, it works as a policy mechanism which serves to reinforce the “realness” of standardised English. In the final sentence of the definition, teachers are reminded of the power of the language policy document within which the glossary appears, given the legal status of the curriculum and thus the legal requirement for them to teach this de-politicised version of standardised English. In the language subordination model, there is an implicit *threat* here then: if teachers do not comply with the policy, then they are law breakers who face

**Table 3.** Standardised English and the grammar glossary as a policy mechanism (DfE 2014a, pp. 94-95).

| Term             | Guidance   | Example  |
|------------------|--|--|
| Standard English | Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as <i>those books</i> , <i>I did it</i> and <i>I wasn't doing anything</i> (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most <b>registers</b> . The aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed in writing and in relatively formal speaking. | <i>I did it because they were not willing to undertake any more work on those houses.</i> [formal Standard English]<br><i>I did it cos they wouldn't do any more work on those houses.</i> [casual Standard English]<br><i>I done it cos they wouldn't do no more work on them houses.</i> [casual non-Standard English] |

penalties and sanctions. Interestingly, the cross-reference to “register” in the glossary leads the reader to the following:

*Classroom lessons*, football commentaries and novels use different registers of the same language, recognised by differences of vocabulary and grammar. Registers are “varieties” of a language which are each tied to a range of uses, in contrast with dialects, which are tied to groups of users. (DfE, 2014a, p. 93, italics added)

Listing “classroom lessons” as an example of a situation with a distinct register reproduces the idea that there are assumed and normative ways of using language in schools, with an implicit assumption that this is standardised English. It suggests all classroom talk follows the same kind of register, when in reality, classrooms are spaces which feature a range of interactional styles and talk types (e.g., Maybin, 2009). Indeed, the secondary framework states that students should be taught to use standardised English “confidently in range of formal and informal contexts, including *classroom discussion*” (DfE, 2014b, p. 17, italics added). As such, policy frames classrooms as spaces which ought to be dominated by standardised language, with teachers once again positioned as language managers who have the authority and licence to police and control student discourse.

### Promises, threats, conformity

A further language policy mechanism with legal ramifications which works as a trajectory for the standard language ideology is the *Teachers’ Standards* (TS) (DfE, 2013a). The TS document is a set of eight benchmarks which “set the minimum requirements for teachers’ practice and conduct” (DfE, 2013a, p. 3), covering performance indicators such as subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, classroom management, and the modelling of standardised English. Smith’s (2013) historical critique of this policy mechanism argues they represent a technology of surveillance and control which coerce teachers into compliance under the promise of rewards and the threat of sanctions, seen here as two further steps in Lippi-Green’s subordination model. The TS are used by teacher education programmes to judge trainee teachers, with those that are deemed to have met the standards awarded “Qualified Teacher Status,” an essential requirement for employment as a teacher. Once employed, teachers who continue to meet the standards are offered further rewards such as promotion; those who do not face disciplinary procedures as deemed appropriate by their employers. The TS are also used by Ofsted as a mechanism to rate the quality of provision in schools during inspections.<sup>1</sup> Of specific interest to this article is standard number three, which states that teachers “must”:

Demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulation and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject. (DfE, 2013a, p. 11)

Standardised English is framed as an explicit indicator of “success,” “articulation” and “high standards,” and as a gatekeeping mechanism for entry into and out of the teaching profession. Teachers and their language practices are positioned as an economic resource within a neoliberal linguistic market characterised by competition and performance, especially when considering that the TS are often used to rate job candidates at application and interview stage. The use of standardised English becomes an incentive for profitable career entry and promotion, commodified as “valuable” and “essential” (Rojo, 2018) in terms of what it means to be a “good teacher” and a legitimate member of the teaching community of practice. Failure to use “correct” standardised English carries material risks in terms of career and economic advancement. Up until April 2020, a further gatekeeper and policy mechanism similar to the TS which teachers had to negotiate was the “Professional Skills Test” in literacy (DfE, 2015), described by government as “practical skills deemed important for a teacher’s general professional practice” (DfE, 2015, p. 1). “Literacy” on this test is reduced to “accuracy” in spelling, punctuation, and grammar, with all applicants to teacher education courses in England having to pass the test in order to secure entry, part of which involved demonstrating their ability to “know and understand” standardised British English, including identifying so-called “errors” in nonstandardised constructions. A list of these constructions including *was/were* variation and

preposition deletion were provided (DfE, 2015, p. 4) and framed as being “unacceptable,” with candidates having to complete or “correct” examples of decontextualized sentences written in non-standardised grammar. The “Skills Test” embodies Street’s (2003) critique of literacy as an autonomous model, where literacy is framed as set of technical “skills” which function as a gatekeeping mechanism for cognitive and economic gain. Individuals here are constructed as deficient if these skills are not mastered and exhibited, enabling the dominance of standardised English to persevere.

Seemingly objective procedures for testing and classifying language are powerful mechanisms and institutional gatekeepers, working to discursively construct standardised English as a key in the opening and closing of doors, for teachers to first enter and then stay in the profession, and later to make advancements in their careers. Non/compliance with the rules bears material consequences, with teachers and students under institutional pressure to adapt and assimilate their language, which poses a threat to their linguistic identity and membership status of a professional community. Cushing (2020a) shows that this kind of language and identity policing is deeply embedded within communities of teachers in England, with interview participants explicitly naming policy mechanisms such as the Teachers’ Standards as powerful forces in the suppression and coercion of linguistic autonomy. In reference to the subordination model then, “non-conformists” are vilified and marginalised, often left with little choice: if they *do* conform they “become complicit in its propagation against themselves, their own interests and identities” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 68); if they do *not* conform, they face sanctions and penalties with material consequences for their own careers and sense of professional identity.

Compliant “conformists” to the standard language ideology are often held up by government as positive examples and used as a further benchmark against which others’ performance is judged. The Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, regularly names schools and teachers who are identified by him to be particularly good policy conformists: those who impose “no-excuses” behaviour policies, perform to “high literacy standards” and engage in “traditional” pedagogies which involve the explicit teaching of grammatical drills, “knowledge” and “rules” (e.g., Gibb, 2018a). Here then, the standard language ideology flows interdiscursively across policy mechanisms and their surrounding political discourse, with a high number of schools across England implementing policies which require students and staff to exclusively use standardised English (see Cushing, 2020b). Schools who do so, according to government, represent teachers “taking back control” of their classrooms and are at the “forefront of raising standards” (Gibb, 2018b), with many of them given further praise in Ofsted inspection reports. As one example, a school that Gibb explicitly praises has a whole-school literacy and oracy policy which states that “students are expected to speak in full sentences, using standard English at all times” (Dixons Trinity Chapeltown, 2020).

Rewards are also given to students who conform to the standard language ideology, most explicitly through their performance in high-stakes tests. In Shohamy’s (2001) framework of critical language testing, tests are powerful, non-neutral artefacts of political and ideological agendas, deployed as a policy mechanism in order to propagate ideologies, grant inclusion/exclusion and (re)define the knowledge of different discourse communities. One way in which this happens is through the perpetuation of language “correctness,” especially with tests that are underpinned by the standard language ideology. Given the institutional power that tests have, they carry the potential to coerce teachers into reproducing standard language ideologies in their pedagogies and practices (Shohamy, 2001, p. 79). The following discussion explores this in relation to two policy mechanisms and high-stakes tests in English education: General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs), taken at the end of secondary school, and Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), taken at the end of primary school.

Students’ written and spoken performances in GCSEs are measured against *assessment objectives* (AOs), sets of government-produced subject-specific criteria (e.g., DfE, 2013b). AOs are highly visible and powerful symbols in schools, with criticisms pointing to how they can warp and distort teaching into pedagogies of compliance (e.g., Macrae et al., 2018). Discourse about AOs can dominate pedagogies, through various modalities such as written feedback, spoken interaction, and linguistic landscapes on classroom walls. Whilst all GCSEs carry high stakes, English Language (DfE, 2013b) is

a compulsory qualification taken by around 720,000 students each year (Ofqual, 2019), and so functions as a particularly powerful gatekeeper to the entry/exclusion of further education and the job market. “Standard English” appears 6 times in the AO taxonomy for GCSE English Language, requiring students to: “write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately,” “demonstrate a confident control of Standard English,” “use grammar correctly,” “write grammatically correct sentences” and “use spoken Standard English effectively” (DfE, 2013b, p. 3). Once again, discourses of language properness are dominant, placing material value on standardised English and the requirement to conform with constructed notions of “correctness,” “effectiveness,” and “coherence” (see Gove, 2011 for an example of political discourse arguing for notions of “conventional grammar” to feature within school curricula).

Within primary schools, changes to assessment instruments in post-2010 policy have meant that students are socialised into the standard language ideology from a young age. This is most explicit in the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) national assessments, which are compulsory tests taken by around 600,000 students at the end of primary school (STA, 2015). The tests were introduced after recommendations in the Bew Report (DfE, 2011) stated that grammar has “clear right or wrong answers,” and that grammar is highly suitable for objective testing mechanisms. Test questions require students to “identify,” “correct,” “match” or “explain” linguistic terminology and grammatical constructions, with an exclusive emphasis on clause-level grammar and standardised British English, leaving no opportunity to explore the social dimension of language. Criticisms of the tests have pointed to how they put undue pressure on young children (Bradbury, 2019), assess decontextualized grammatical knowledge and terminology (Safford, 2016) and coerce teachers into reproducing standard language ideologies in their classrooms (Cushing, 2020c). Similarly, interview data from Safford (2016) reveal teachers feeling “compelled to tell pupils their speaking or their writing is ‘wrong’” (Safford, 2016, p. 12), despite teachers not valuing or believing in this way of thinking about language. Whilst parents, teachers and students organise annual nationwide strikes in protest of the tests (see Busby, 2019), the UK government has responded to criticisms by claiming that the tests have “raised literacy standards” (e.g., Gibb, 2018c). As this article has demonstrated, in the eyes of the government, “literacy standards” are equated with “Standard English” and “traditional grammar.” The GPS tests represent a particularly visible and powerful mechanism in the propagation of the standard language ideology, strengthened by constructed notions of academic rewards, success, and failure.

### **Policy mechanisms of the standard language ideology: Conclusions and implications**

This article has examined textual traces of the standard language ideology in current education policy in England. It has shown how this ideology gets tended to and propagated via a *cluster* of covert and overt policy mechanisms, using Lippi-Green’s model of language subordination, Shohamy’s model of expanded language policy and tools from critical stylistics. Although the standard language ideology has long been in circulation in education discourse and policy in England, my analysis has focused on post-2010 reforms and the historical continuities found within these mechanisms. In particular, I have explored the nostalgic (re)emphasis on so-called “back to basics” grammar, the reductive and depoliticised framings of standardised English, the explicit mapping of “academic success” with “standardised English” and the various chains of oppositions (Milani, 2010) found within policy, such as “correct-incorrect,” “appropriate-inappropriate,” “articulate-inarticulate” and “literate-illiterate.” In their ahistorical and apolitical framings, current policy mechanisms show a deep aversion to any exploration of the structural power relations that are embedded in language, allowing for the obfuscated presentation of dominant cultural and ideological forces (see Street, 2003). Through the textual patterns of these policy mechanisms, teachers are constructed as standard language role models who have a professional, legal and moral responsibility for ensuring that all students are “fluent” in standardised English. These policy “rules” are presented in a way which allow restricted space for the development of critical linguistic awareness, with few—if any—opportunities for students to

deconstruct the structural reasons as to *why* standardised English carries power and prestige, or to understand *who* continues to construct and impose it.

I began with the exposition that schools are central domains for the operationalisation of language policies, with policies being powerful tools used by authoritative bodies in their attempts to control and manipulate language knowledge and attitudes, as a technology of language surveillance and governance. Policy mechanisms serve as one force in which powerful institutions attempt to coerce policy subjects into accepting regimes of truth (Foucault, 1979), playing a key role in the supervision, surveillance, and the maintenance of hegemonic discourses such as the standard language ideology and the myth that there are “better” and “worse” ways of speaking. Although ethnographic research in critical language policy rejects a top-bottom flow of power from governments to classrooms (see Johnson, 2013, pp. 39–47), all policy participants towards the “micro-level” of a language education policy cycle (i.e. teachers; management; students) inevitably face pressures to conform and comply with sets of deeply embedded language ideologies, under a system of promises, consequences and threats. In interviews with teachers, my own work (Cushing, 2020a) has shown how this is especially true in relation to the cluster of standard language policy mechanisms which this article has examined. These mechanisms include curriculum documents, criteria against which teachers’ performance is judged, language tests, assessment objectives, mark schemes, and political discourse. The propagation of the standard language ideology via these mechanisms is brought together in Figure 2, using the template from Shohamy’s (2006) model as first presented in Figure 1.

Importantly, these mechanisms are not isolated from each other, but work in an intertextual tandem in reinforcing the standard language ideology as *de facto* language policy, a relationship which is represented through the connecting lines which run horizontally across the mechanisms. This builds on Shohamy’s model then, in that it considers policy mechanisms not to be bounded and discrete, but intricately connected and networked in a chain-like assemblage (see also Barakos, 2016, pp. 29–30) which creates a weathering process of standardisation and ideological imposition. Throughout these mechanisms, teachers and students are presented with a sanitised and depoliticised version of standardised English, which intentionally disregards its abstract and idealised nature, its socio-political roots and status, and its association with powerful members of society. This reductive framing is problematic because of the way it *devalues* non-standard varieties, and fails to recognise the linguistic skill that children use when using non-standard grammar to communicate a range of social meanings (e.g., Moore, *forthcoming*; Snell, 2013). In addition, the mechanisms construct students and teachers as subjects which must acquire and “master” standardised English in order to become legitimate members of society, through processes whereby their language is monitored and governed (Rojo, 2018).

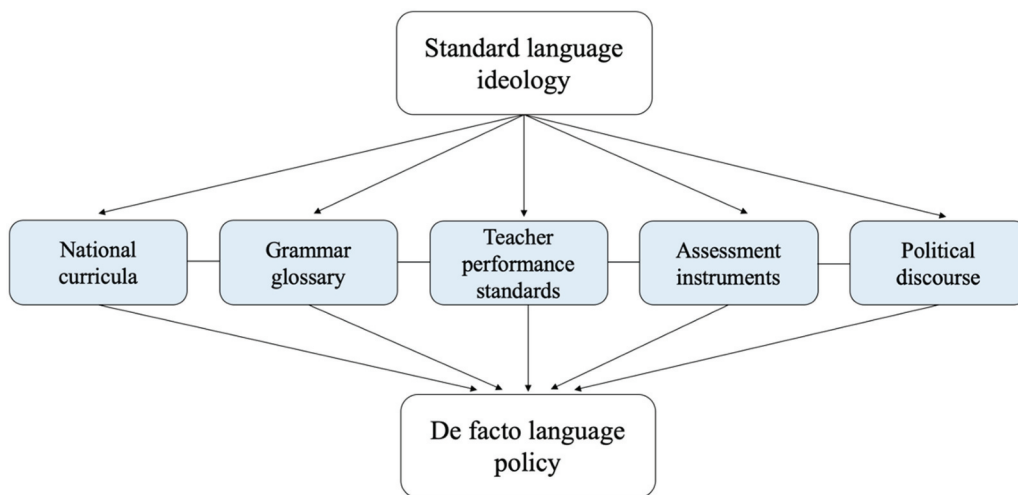


Figure 2. Policy mechanisms of the standard language ideology in England’s schools.

My analysis of policy mechanisms has been sensitive to the current conditions of education policy in England's education system, characterised by a radical shift towards accountability, standards, discipline, surveillance and control (e.g., Chakraborty et al., 2019). Whilst using language as a system of control in England's schools has a long history (e.g., Sealey, 1994), this article has shown that current policy is particularly explicit in the ideologies about language it projects, and that these ideologies run from early years through to secondary school. However, whilst a cluster of policy mechanisms such as the ones in Figure 2 can be seen as one explicit attempt by government to further socialise students and teachers into thinking that there is a "right" and "wrong" way of using language, further work is needed to better understand how the standard language ideology gets manifested in classroom practice and the potential that this has in shaping and suppressing linguistic identity. Joining the dots between policy and practice is important in tracing the trajectory of a language policy from conception through to implementation, and crucially, to understand how teachers and students might accept, negotiate, or resist top-down mechanisms and what role they play within the policy assemblage themselves (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Menken & García, 2010). Fieldwork, activism and researcher-teacher collaboration is needed to understand how teachers navigate and enact clusters of language policy mechanisms, how these enactments intersect with their own ideological positions, and how such mechanisms may circulate in reproducing or resisting standard language ideologies.

## Note

1. Office for Standards in Education, an inspection system for all state-maintained schools in England. Schools are judged to be either "outstanding," "good," "requires improvement" or "inadequate," after around 2 days of inspection. See Perryman et al. (2018) for a critical history.

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