Dialects and “Proper” Usage
All but the very smallest language communities show dialect variation. Dialect differences involve all aspects of language – syntax, lexicon, morphology, phonology, etc.

Syntax
I don’t have any socks.
I don’t have no socks.
I don’t got no socks.
I am walking.
I be walking.
waiting for Mike
waiting on Mike
waiting in line
waiting on line (NYC)

Phonology
• Mary marry merry (homophones in most but not all dialects)
• my boots vs. “mah beauts”
• my sister Ann vs. my sister “Ian” (NYC)
• Jimmy vs. Jimmih
• park the car vs. pahk the cah

Idiosyncratic pronunciation differences
• inSURance vs. INsurance
• greasy vs. “greazy”
• Washington vs. Warshington
• poLICE vs. POlice

Standard or Preferred Dialects
Standard, preferred or “prestige” dialects emerge from dialect variation.

British English: London dialect, not cockney, Scottish, Irish, Manchester, etc.

American English: West/Western Midwest, not Southern, South Boston, Brooklyn, BEV, inner city Chicago, etc.

Spanish: Barcelona/Madrid, not Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, etc.

What is it about the standard dialects that causes them to be preferred over the nonstandard forms? Are they preferred for linguistic reasons; i.e., are they more grammatical?

Opinions vary. John Simon (theater critic/language guru):

“Why should we consider some, usually poorly educated, subculture’s notion of the relationship between sound and meaning? … As for ‘I be,’ ‘you be,’ ‘he be,’ etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with roots in history but of ignorance of how language works.”

And this:

“The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled the merchandise in their slave ships, or as the inmates of concentration camps were dealt with by their Nazi jailers.”

Yikes! Position is pretty clear: SE is preferred on purely linguistic grounds: “I am” has its roots in accepted classical grammar; “I be” has its roots in ignorance.
Another view – linguist Dwight Bollinger:

“In language there are no licensed practitioners, but the woods are full of midwives, herbalists, colonic irrigationists, bonesetters, and general-purpose witch doctors, some abysmally ignorant, ... whom we shall call shamans [read: John Simon and his fellow language mavens] ... We are living in an African village and Albert Schweitzer has not arrived yet.”

MIT linguist Stephen Pinker:

“Most of the prescriptive rules of the language mavens [i.e., shamans] make no sense on any level. They are bits of folklore that originated for screwball reasons several hundred years ago and have perpetuated themselves ever since ... The rules conform neither to logic nor to tradition ... Indeed, most of the ‘ignorant errors’ these rules are supposed to correct display an elegant logic and an acute sensitivity to the grammatical texture of the language, to which the language mavens are oblivious.”

These views could hardly be more different. Who’s right? The language mavens or the linguists?

*Short answer: the linguists.* No doubt about it.

Arguments in a minute, but if we accept (for the moment) that there are no linguistic grounds for preferring the standard, how do standard dialects become preferred? Answer is very simple: *standard dialects are those associated with geographic centers of wealth and political power.*

**British English:** Why London and not Manchester or Liverpool?

**Spanish:** Why Barcelona and not Guatemala or Puerto Rico?

**American English:** Why this broad swath from the upper Midwest to the west coast and not Brooklyn, rural Mississippi, south Boston, south-side Chicago (Sipowit), East St. Louis, urban Detroit, rural Appalachia, rural Arkansas?

One more wrinkle: It’s too simplistic to say that there is a single preferred dialect – “cultivated” or “aristocratic” southern speech patterns are quite well accepted (Trent Lott [Mississippi], Robert Byrd [WVa], Sam Nunn [Georgia], etc.). So are some “educated” NYC dialects: Mario Cuomo, Rudy Guliani.

So, what are the common threads among the dialect “haves” vs. the “have nots”? Simple: *Money, political power.*

Are there any counter-examples; e.g., a language in which the standard dialect was associated not with Madrid but with the slums of Rio?

Is it really true that there are no linguistic grounds for preferring the standard dialect?

*I don’t have no twinkies.*

This one has to be messed up, doesn’t it? Two negatives make a positive! It’s just not logical. It does violence to the language – just like the Nazis. Guess what? Many languages do this:

*Je ne sais pas.* (I do not know)

Yikes – *ne* negates; *pas* negates. It’s a dreaded double negative.

Spanish has a very similar construction. Many languages do. Why not English?
Proper construction is supposed to be:

I don’t have any twinkies.

The any here turns out to function strictly as a grammatical place holder. How do we know? Can’t be used alone:

*I have any twinkies. ???*

The any here serves a place holder function in the same way as the it of “It is raining.” The “no” of “I don’t have no twinkies” fulfills this grammatical function just as well as “any.”

Last point: In the world of grammar, two negatives do not make a positive. Would you accept this sentence?

I was about to go to the store when, at the last minute, I discovered that I don’t have no twinkies.

Here’s another one: Don’t split infinitives (e.g., to go).

... to boldly go where no man has gone before

boldly has intruded in the middle of to go. Here’s the educated way:

... to go boldly where no man has gone before

Yech. Any idea where this “rule” came from? Latin!!!!
dare (to give), docere (to teach), contare (to sing)

Reasoning (?) (1) Latin doesn’t split infinitives, (2) Latin is way cool, (3) English speakers (if they want to be way cool) shouldn’t split infinitives.

Don’t end a sentence with a preposition. Why not? Because I said so.

uncooth: That is something I’ve been thinking about.

cooth: That is something about which I’ve been thinking.

There is simply no natural rule of English that forbids ending a sentence with a preposition. How preposterous is this artificial rule?

This is a rule up with which we should not put.

-Churchill

How would you fix this one:

Tennis is the game I’ve been playing around with.

It could be completely reworded from scratch – but why?

There’s nothing wrong with it.

“Misuse” of hopefully:

Hopefully, our team will win.

What’s wrong? The shaman’s argument: hopefully is an adverb, like carefully, as in “Bob read the book carefully.” This one is ok because there is an agent (Bob) doing something (reading) in a careful manner. In Hopefully, our team will win. there is no agent doing something in a hopeful manner. This does violence to the language, much in the manner of Nazis, so say:

It is to be hoped that our team will win.

-or-

I hope our team will win.

Problem with “It is to be hoped…”? Easy. Sound like a dork.

Problem with “I hope our team will win.”? It doesn’t mean the same thing as “Hopefully, our team will win.”
Example: Michigan fan talking to an Ohio State fan.

_I hope Michigan will win._

This is fine. Why? The speaker refers to his/her own hopes alone. OSU fan does not need to share this hope.

_Hopefully, Michigan will win._

This sentence does not work in this context. Why? The _hopefully_ construction implies a shared hope – which the OSU fan will not agree with.

So, the advice to reword the sentence is unhelpful.

More fundamentally, there’s nothing wrong with the “Hopefully” construction to begin with.

Here’s the deal: There are two very different kinds of adverbs in English: _phrase adverbs_ (these behave exactly like _carefully_ in “Bob read the book carefully”) and _sentence adverbs_.

_sentence adverbs_: Apply globally to the sentence as a whole, not locally to an agent performing an action. _Hopefully_ in “Hopefully, our …” is a sentence adverb, not a phrase adverb. English has lots of these:

- **Curiously**, he never showed up.
- **Generally**, we treat 1st offenses lightly.
- **Amazingly**, there is nothing wrong with this sentence.
- **Confidentially**, John Simon is a hairball.

_Ideally_, language ‘experts’ would actually know something about language.

Is there anything wrong with these sentences? Are they different in any way from _hopefully_? Does the jackass who came up with this “rule” know what he/she is talking about? Why was _hopefully_ picked on and _not_ _candidly, basically, incidentally, predictably, oddly, supposedly_ …?

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What about constructions that seem obviously wrong?

- **He workin’**. (nonstandard)
- **He be workin’**. (nonstandard)
- **He is working**. (standard)

Imagine that we handed these sentences to the world’s best linguist – knows everything about every language, but does not know any sociolinguistics; i.e., knows nothing about preferred dialects.

We ask the linguistic one question: Which of the forms above _is_/are standard and which nonstandard?

One last point: Is it the case that nonstandard forms are stripped-down, or simplified versions of the standard dialect?

No. There are grammatical features in the standard dialect that can go unmarked in the nonstandard dialect.

Just as often the reverse is true. **BEV**:

- **He workin’**: Not the same as “He is working.” Specifically means he’s working _right now._
- **He be workin’**: Not the same as “He is working.” Refers specifically to a habitual or frequent activity, as in: “He be workin’ Tuesdays all month.”

A form of _aspect_ is being marked here that is not observed in SAE. Does that make SAE impoverished? No, there are other ways to do it, using words like _right now_ or _usually_.

One more simple example: SAE “you” for both plural and singular vs. the nonstandard “you” vs. “y’all” or “youse.”
Where does this leave us?

If the criteria for preferring standard or prestige dialects over nonstandard dialects are political and economic rather than cognitive and linguistic, should people in the education business start advising students to speak and write any way they please?